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Samsung
KS7500 TV
Epson 4K/HDR
projector
65in Hisense
Cambridge Audio
soundbase
Philips Fidelio B1

OPPO: 4K UNBOUND!

Feature-packed UDP-203 player takes
Ultra HD Blu-ray to the next level

Sonic saviours

We pick the best
high-end soundbar



OLED!
THE TV TECH
TO RULE
THEM ALL?

Power player
Denon's AVR-X6300H
goes up to eleven...



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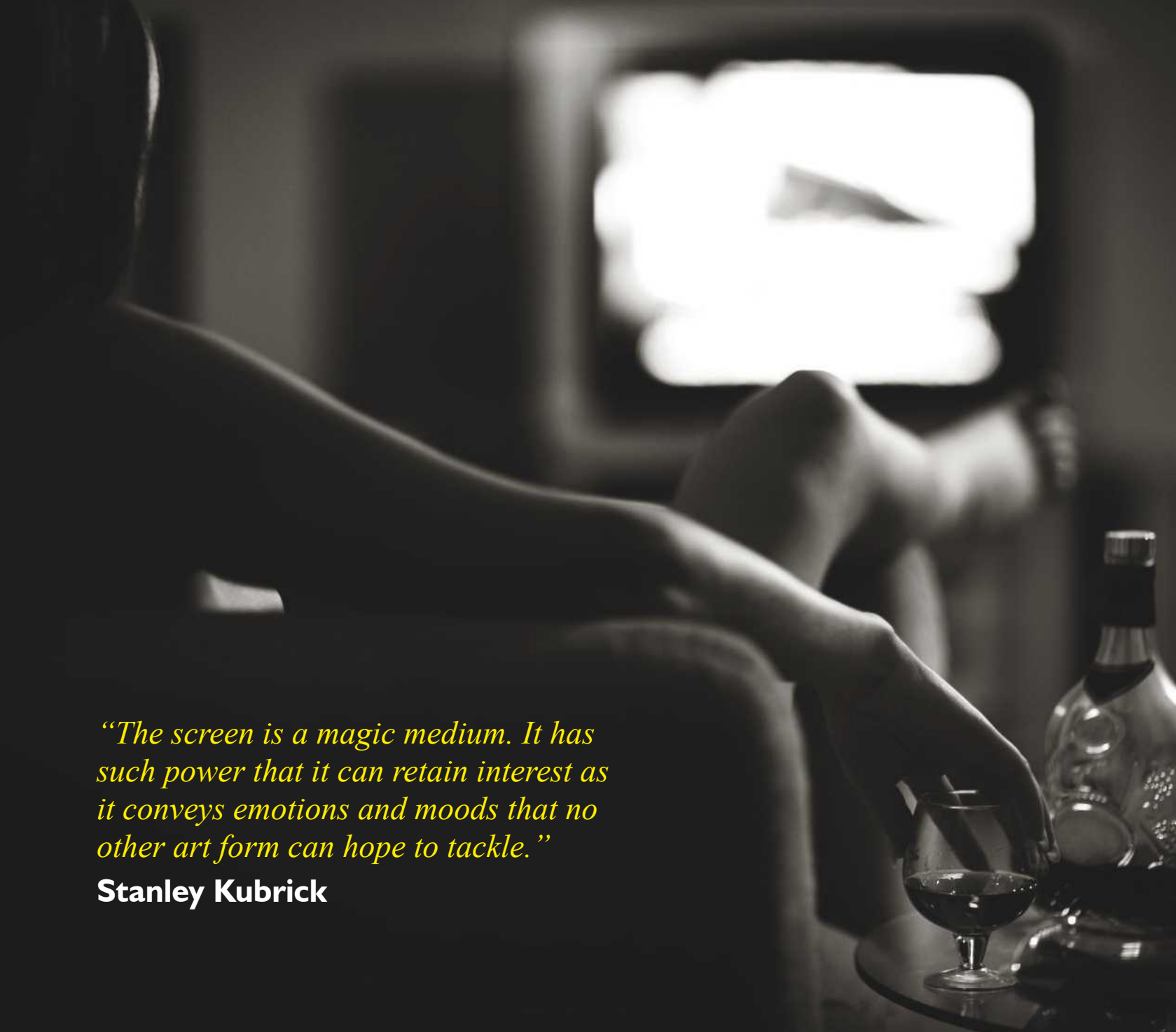
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Stanley Kubrick

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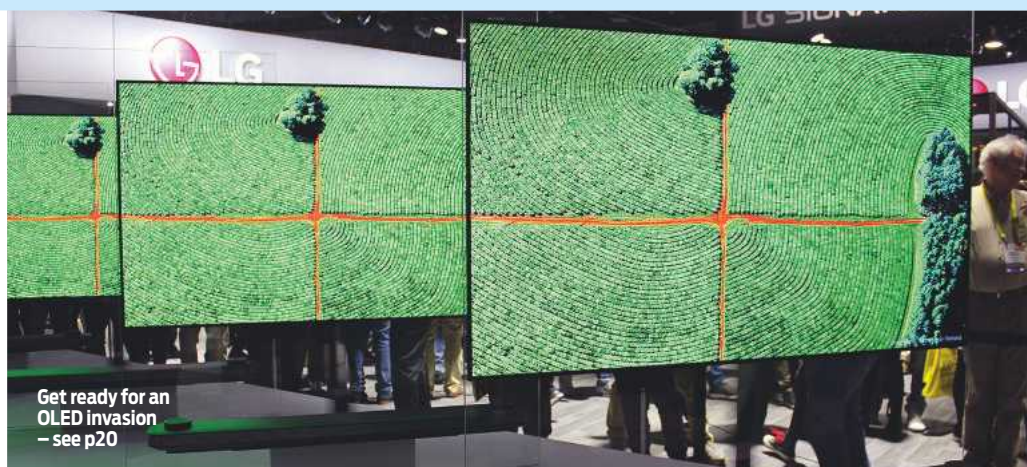
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NEXT ISSUE ON SALE: February 23, 2017



Welcome

In my household, not a lot happens over the New Year period beyond eating too much and relaxing with a pile of Blu-rays, but the AV world doesn't take a break.



With the CES tech show running in the first week of

January, manufacturers were setting up booths in Las Vegas while you were probably scoffing the last Quality Street. And it means that 2017 has already got off to a flying start.

CES (see p20 for our show report) lays out the roadmap for the year ahead, and it seems we've got a jolly journey in store.

OLED TVs are on the horizon that promise to bring new levels of super-thin cinematic goodness to your viewing room, while Samsung is releasing a new-look

QLED TV range that it believes can take on all-comers.

Meanwhile, movie studios are lining up behind the Dolby Vision format, and releasing more Ultra HD Blu-rays than ever. AV has never had a brighter future. Literally.

Mark Craven
Editor



MENU



CONTRIBUTORS



John Archer:
The UK's most experienced TV tester cut his teeth as an early HCC staffer



Jon Thompson:
Film producer and post-production expert delves deep into Hollywood and AV



Steve May:
HCC's former Editor-in-Chief is one of the UK's most respected AV journo



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Technical expert Martin is renowned throughout the home cinema industry



Richard Stevenson:
Industry veteran and former Editor of UK CE trade journal ERT



Adrian Justins:
Made his name as the editor of *What Video & TV* and *What Home Cinema*

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BULLETIN

→ **NEWS HIGHLIGHTS** SONY Ultra-short-throw model joins Ultra HD projector lineup
BT SPORT Broadcaster gives 4K football an Atmos upgrade **BASE** Digital video outguns physical disc sales in the UK **BBC IPLAYER** Catchup service offers a taste of 4K treats to come **NEWS X10** The hottest stories in bite-sized chunks **DOCTOR STRANGE** Could it be magic on BD? & MORE!

The new Master of HDR?

Panasonic 65EZ1002 → www.panasonic.com/uk



Panasonic has announced a new Ultra HD OLED TV that supports HDR 10 and Hybrid Log-Gamma (HLG) HDR, as well as incorporating a Technics-tuned soundbar. Expected to hit the UK in June, the 65in EZ1002 employs a 'Master HDR OLED' panel that Panasonic boasts has a peak brightness double that of conventional OLED sets. The flatscreen also sports a refreshed Studio Colour HCX2 processing engine. Turn to p20 for more on Panasonic's tantalising telly and other AV developments from the recent CES tech show...

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Big thrills for a small space

Sony VPL-VZ1000ES → www.sony.co.uk



Sony will expand its ultra-short-throw projector range in April with the 4K HDR capable VPL-VZ1000ES. Able to craft a 100in picture from as little as 6in from a wall, the new projector uses a laser light source in conjunction with Sony's SXRD panel tech, and claims a colour light output of 2,500 Lumens – a 25 per cent increase over the brand's previous LSPX-W1S. The VPL-VZ1000ES is also 40 per cent smaller than its hefty \$50,000 predecessor and Sony teases that the retail price will be 'significantly lower' too.

Panasonic doubles up on 4K BD



Panasonic will be refreshing its Ultra HD Blu-ray player lineup with new models in 2017. The DMP-UB300

and DMP-UB400 (pictured) both employ a revised version of Panasonic's HCX Ultra HD processor and support 4K/60p output. The UB400 features twin HDMI ports – allowing users to separate audio and video signals – while both cater for hi-res audio playback including DSD and FLAC, and 4K streaming. Prices and release dates are still unconfirmed.

www.panasonic.com/uk

Nvidia updates Shield TV box



Nvidia has taken the wraps off the next iteration of its nifty Shield TV set-top box. The first version of this Android-powered media player/games

console impressed when we reviewed it back in *HCC* #262, and this update should fare even better, with Nvidia claiming that it's three-times faster than any other streaming box, and adds Amazon 4K HDR streaming alongside Netflix and YouTube variants. The new Nvidia Shield is due to go on sale any day now, priced around £190. shield.nvidia.co.uk

BT scores with Atmos

Telecoms titan throws down the gauntlet to rivals, says HDR is next

BT TV will begin broadcasting live Premier League football with Dolby Atmos audio from January 31. In a world's first for live sports coverage, the telco giant will add the audio option to its 4K UHD broadcasts, beginning with its Liverpool vs Chelsea fixture. There will be no additional charge for the audio upgrade.

BT says that going forward every Premier League match will be broadcast in 4K with Dolby Atmos. However there are currently no plans to extend Atmos to additional BT Sports channel exclusives, such as Moto GP. One reason is the complexity of capturing object-based audio in a live environment.

HCC had an early preview of the technology at the BT Tower. Atmos on live sports is quite different from the soundmixes we're familiar with on Atmos-encoded Blu-rays, with the 3D sound format being used mainly to convey the atmosphere of the match.

BT Sport chief operating officer Jamie Hindhaugh told *HCC* that the company has been working with Dolby on the project for 18 months. 'We're breaking new ground here,' he says.

Clearly, producing Atmos for live events is different from mixing 3D audio for films. 'In movies they have a lot of time to decide how they move objects, steering helicopters overhead and so on,' says Hindhaugh. 'In a stadium environment, those are not the kind of sounds we want going over your head'

The number of audio objects is far lower



Jamie Hindhaugh: 'It's very different from creating an Atmos mix in post production, where you have time to go into detail'

than what might be used for a movie mix, too. 'Overall, there are typically sixteen audio objects in a mix,' says Hindhaugh. 'We use between two to four to bring that height experience through, and then separate out a few more key elements, the PA for example, and the commentary, so you get dialogue clearly separated. A lot of the sounds that we're trying to bring through are more immersive in their natural capture, so it's how you position them in the soundspace.'

During our demo, a crowd chorus of *You'll Never Walk Alone* created a genuine sense of emotional involvement. With the height channel carrying crowd noise and ambience, there's the illusion of stadium seating; it gives real scale to the soundstage.

More 4K sport on the way

BT TV has also said it will double the number of sports events broadcast in Ultra HD during 2017. This increase has been made possible by simplifying production processes to originate both HD and 4K coverage from a single OB truck, using a single commentary team. 'Now everyone will have the same experience, whether they're watching 4K or HD,' we're told. In the process, BT has become the world's biggest producer of live 4K content. 'And we've got HDR to come,' declares Hindhaugh.

There are currently no plans to expand 4K coverage beyond sports, although executives confirm that BT is in discussion with Hollywood studios.



BT: adding Atmos to 4K football

Playlist...

Team *HCC* spins up its disc picks of the month

Suicide Squad: Extended Cut (All-region BD)

Forget the nay-sayers, this latest DC Comics superhero blockbuster is a big bunch of crazy fun wrapped in stunning neon-soaked Full HD visuals and Atmos audio.



The Hurt Business (R2 DVD)



A fascinating look at the rise of mixed martial arts fighting with input from some real heavy-hitters.

Kubo and the Two Strings (All-region BD)



Laika's stop-motion masterpiece may only offer a DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix on Blu-ray, but it still delivers a *tour de force* of audio excellence.

House of Traps (Region B BD)



Bey Logan's informative new chat-track makes this 1982 martial arts flick even more fun on Blu-ray.

Venus Peter (Region B BD)



This little-seen piece of Scottish whimsy delivers plenty of pleasing picture postcard visuals in hi-def.

At the 'plex...

Heading out to see a flick?
Catch these this month

Resident Evil: The Final Chapter



February 03: After 15 years of bigscreen zombie-bashing, leading lady Milla Jovovich and director Paul W.S. Anderson bow out with one final action-packed romp based on the popular survival-horror videogame franchise.

The LEGO Batman Movie



February 10: The breakout star of 2014's *The LEGO Movie* gets his own solo outing that promises to mine the more obscure corners of the character's comic book mythos in order to put a smile on the faces of Bat-fans everywhere.

John Wick: Chapter 2

February 17: Hotly-anticipated follow-up to one of the most enjoyable – and most stylish – action films of the past few years. Let the trigger-happy mayhem begin...

Digital outguns discs

But *Star Wars* shows that the Force is still strong with Blu-ray...

The UK's video entertainment market has finally shifted towards digital as new figures released by the British Association for Screen Entertainment (BASE) show streaming and renting overtook physical ownership in 2016.

The data outlines 51 per cent of market value last year came from consumers opting to rent or stream movies and TV. Figures for the previous year showed physical media accounting for 52 per cent, and digital 48 per cent.

While this represents a turn that many have been predicting – or falsely suggesting had already happened – for years, the overall picture from BASE is of a still-healthy Blu-ray and DVD market, and a booming home entertainment market overall.

Year-on-year growth of 2.2 per cent meant £2.25bn was ringing through UK tills and websites as film fans and telly addicts enjoyed a year marked by the releases of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, *Spectre*, *Deadpool*, *Captain America: Civil War* and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, plus popular TV shows such as *Game of Thrones*, *Planet Earth II* and *The Night Manager*.

A breakdown of format figures for *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* shows physical media remaining the preferred choice for new release titles. The Disney hit stole the top sales spot with over 2.3m copies (from both physical and digital), yet a massive 51.5 per cent came via DVD and 34.4 per cent from BD. Digital accounted for 14.1 per cent.



Deadpool:
The UK's 4K
favourite

Adds BASE: 'This is the second home entertainment record for *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* in 2016 as the title took the mantle for fastest-ever-selling Blu-ray earlier in the year, selling through 531,949 Blu-ray copies in the first week of release.'



Fantastic Fox

Despite this success for Disney, Twentieth Century Fox won the Blu-ray battle, amassing a 21.2 per cent value share courtesy of key titles *The Martian*, *The*

Revenant, *Spectre* and *Deadpool*. There's also good news for Universal Pictures, which took 18.5 per cent of value share across all formats. The studio saw 38 of its releases pass the 100,000 sales milestone, including 2016 flicks *The Secret Life of Pets* and *Star Trek Beyond*, plus 2015 titles *Jurassic World* and *Minions*.

Ultra HD Blu-ray sales were added to the 2016 mix, with 96 titles released. Perhaps surprisingly, the best-selling platter was *Deadpool*, although its sales tally of 11,899 units illustrates that 4K disc is still very much an early adopter market.

When it comes to digital, subscription services are the driving force. Says Richard Cooper, Head of Video at global information supplier, IHS Markit: 'The two key players in this market, Amazon and Netflix, now both offer the ability for UK subscribers to watch offline, enabling access to extensive catalogues without the need for mobile internet. Digital retail and rental markets have also expanded with players such as Sky extending their offer to include TV content.'

LG joins Atmos soundbar party

AV brand also experiments with surround sound using a new split design model



LG has announced a Dolby Atmos-enabled soundbar that will bring it up to speed with a category that already includes models from Yamaha, Samsung and Philips.

Details about the new SJ9 Atmos soundbar (pictured) are a little thin on the ground, with LG only saying it incorporates 'cutting-edge speakers', including a pair of upfiring units. It isn't, however, supplied with any wireless rears. 4K passthrough via HDMI, 24-bit/192kHz upsampling, hi-res audio support and integrated Chromecast are other feature tricks.

Also announced is the SJ8, a non-Atmos model that can be used with certain 2017 LG flatscreens as a replacement for the original stand. Again, this offers 4K passthrough, hi-res audio and Chromecast.

Finally, the SJ7 features a split design, meaning users can choose between running it as a traditional soundbar or two speakers for stereo. One of the units is battery powered and can also be used as a standalone Bluetooth speaker, or – oddly – as a wireless rear with the other half on front duty. www.lg.com/uk

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DYNAUDIO

Extras...

Small items that could make a big impression...

The Walt Disney Film Archives: The Animated Movies 1921-1968


A must-own for any fan of the legendary animation studio, this 620-page behemoth is the first in a series of volumes from Taschen celebrating the history of Disney. Edited by film historian Daniel Kothenschulte, who was given unrestricted access to the Disney Archives and Animation Research Library, this £135 tome is packed with previously unseen photos, sketches and other artistic insights into the creation of some of the best-loved movies ever made.

T2: Future Wars Print


This striking 18in x 24in premium giclée *Terminator 2* print by Dave Seeley is limited to just 150 pieces and is available from Sideshow Toys either unframed (\$90) or mounted in a custom designer frame (\$240). Each print features an automated pencil signature and a seal of authenticity!

Star Wars: Rogue One – Ultimate Visual Guide


Can't tell the difference between an AT-ACT and an AT-AT? Want to know how

Chirrut Îmwe's lightbow works? Then grab DK's lavishly-illustrated guide to the latest *Star Wars* movie, which unearths a treasure trove of obscure info as it explores the spin-off's characters, planets, weapons and vehicles. Available for around £18.

BBC iPlayer trials UHD

4K experiment confirms HLG backwards compatibility, wows viewers

The BBC's spectacular Ultra HD trial on iPlayer is just a taster of 4K things to come. So says David Daniels, Project Director AV at the DTG (Digital Television Group), overseer of broadcast standards and technology in the UK. He told *HCC* that it is highly likely a full 4K iPlayer service is now on the cards.

The trial has featured UHD footage from the Beeb's *Planet Earth II* nature series. It's been available for a limited period on select Panasonic 4K UHD TVs, as well as the new Virgin Media V6 TiVo set-top box and the 2TB Sky Q. Those that have seen it have been gobsmacked by its clarity.

If the BBC does indeed introduce a regular UHD service via iPlayer in 2017, it will be the first time premium 4K programming has been made available outside a Pay TV environment. What's more, it'll also herald the arrival of HDR to broadcast 4K, courtesy of Hybrid Log-Gamma (HLG). The technology, developed by the BBC and NHK, enables high dynamic range broadcasting within a standard TV production ecosystem. Other broadcasters, including Sky and BT, are looking to use the tech.

'The BBC has been privately testing UHD for some time,' reveals Daniels. 'The addition of high dynamic range is significant.' He notes that this is the first delivery of so called 'better pixels' in a real-world environment.

Hardware limits

Not that you'll have been able to see these better pixels. As yet there are no TVs available with HLG support, so consumers have only been able to view the 2,160p footage in SDR, but that's the point. HLG has been designed to offer backwards-compatibility for 4K screens without HLG HDR. The first HLG HDR 4K TVs are expected to begin shipping during 2017. The BBC hopes that by signalling its



David Daniels: 'The BBC has been privately testing UHD for some time. However, this is the first HDR/HLG trial'

intentions with HLG, manufacturers will fast-track support.

The DTG has been leading the way with closed-door trials for 4K UHD broadcast and early HLG compliance, through a series of so-called industry 'plug-fests' (pictured).

'The HDR HLG trial will highlight issues with backwards-compatibility both in the displays that are currently in production, but also in the infrastructure available to deliver such services,' explains Daniels. 'There may well be unforeseen challenges in streaming such bandwidth-hungry programming and any trial can help us to find ways to overcome them. By trialling UHD in this way on iPlayer, we will be able to assess how many devices are capable of receiving such services and perhaps, as importantly, how capable the infrastructure is of delivering these in an OTT environment.'

HCC understands that the iPlayer trial is compliant with the TS 101 154 DVB standard, which not only supports HLG and PQ HDR but also high frame rate (HFR) and next-generation audio. Dolby Atmos via iPlayer? That could be next.

Andy Quested, Head of Technology for BBC HD, confirmed to *HCC* that the clip had indeed been graded on an HLG HDR display. 'What it proves is compatibility with non-HDR displays. The great thing about HLG is no need for an HLG workflow.'

Of course, Hybrid Log-Gamma may get a new consumer-friendly monicker before it comes to market. 'Whatever it is sold as, let's hope there's a good level of education for both retailers and consumers as to what is actually being presented,' states Daniels.



Planet Earth II was used for the 4K trial



This month's top 10 news stories in handy, bite-sized chunks...



1 LG speaker takes flight

LG is helping take your music collection to new heights with its Levitating Portable Speaker.

The 360-degree omnidirectional PJ9 features a turbine blade-inspired design and hovers in place with the aid of powerful electromagnets housed inside the accompanying 'Levitation Station'.

According to LG bigwig Brian Kwon, the PJ9 shows that LG 'is serious about bringing something different to the table'. Or even a couple of inches above the table...

2 HDMI refresh

The HDMI Forum has announced the official HDMI 2.1 specification.

This includes data rates up to 48Gbps, support for 8K/60Hz and 4K/120Hz, eARC support for object-based audio and device auto-detect, and a Game Mode variable refresh rate for better 3D rendering.

3 4K blamed for rising bills

British Gas claims that 4K TVs are to blame for an increase in electricity bills. Its recent Home Energy Report 2016 claims that the average 4K TV in 2015 consumed 33 per cent more energy than an HDTV. With 9m UK homes expected to have a 4K TV by 2019, the company reckons we're heading to a 4,264 per cent rise in energy usage, costing UK homeowners an additional £82m.

4 *Rogue One* date leaked?

Could the latest *Star Wars* film be hitting DVD/BD on April 28 in the UK? That's the release date several online retailers (including Amazon.co.uk) briefly listed at the start of 2017 before quickly taking it down.

5 *Deadpool* tops piracy poll

It may have been the UK's third-biggest selling Blu-ray last year, but that didn't stop *Deadpool* from taking the top spot in Torrent Freak's rundown of 2016's most-pirated films. Fellow comic book flicks *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, *Captain America: Civil War* and *X-Men: Apocalypse* also made the chart. HBO's *Game of Thrones* topped the list of most-pirated TV shows for the fifth year in a row. Just. Buy. The. Disc.

6 Sony Movie Channel launches on Freeview

The Sony Movie Channel has come to Freeview and Virgin where it has replaced previous film channel MovieMix. Actually, given that the lineup of films looks pretty much the same as it did before – the channel 'premiered' with *Godzilla* (1998) and Schwarzenegger classic *Predator* – it's really more of a rebrand than a new launch.

7 Soundbars in disguise

In other rebranding news, Gibson Innovations has given one of its Philips soundbars a new name. As such, the Dolby Atmos-compatible Philips Fidelio B8 soundbar will henceforth be known as the Philips Fidelio SkyQuake, which sounds a bit like a Transformers villain. Maybe that's the idea.

8 TIDAL offers 'Masters'

Music streaming platform TIDAL has integrated MQA and is offering it to all 'Hi-Fi' tier subscribers under a new 'Master' listing. Initially available on desktop, a variety of content from labels and artists (including Warner Music Group) is available in MQA right now, and TIDAL claims the collection will grow rapidly.

9 *Maniacs* in March

The UK Criterion Collection Blu-ray range will be graced by two keenly-awaited releases in March. First up, on March 20, is a brand-new 4K restoration of John Waters' shocking sophomore feature *Multiple Maniacs*. Following a week later is the *Lone Wolf and Cub* boxset housing all six films in the classic Japanese swordplay series.

10 *Billy Lynn's* 60fps disc

The US arm of Sony Pictures Home Entertainment has confirmed that its 4K BD release of director Ang Lee's latest film, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, will be presented at 60fps. Sony's combo pack (which also includes 3D and 2D 1080p platters) hits the US on Feb 14, four days after the film opens at UK cinemas.



Premiere...

What's happening in the world of TV and films...

Squad spin-offs



Suicide Squad director David Ayer and actress Margot Robbie are set to team up again for *Gotham City Sirens*, an all-female comic book adventure that will reportedly partner Harley Quinn with fellow Batman *femme fatales* Catwoman and Poison Ivy. Meanwhile, work is also underway on a *Suicide Squad* sequel and a solo spin-off for Will Smith's Deadshot.

Train... remake on track

French film studio Gaumont is working on an English-language remake of Korean horror thriller *Train to Busan*. The original was one of 2016's best-reviewed fright flicks and will be arriving on DVD and BD in the UK on February 27.

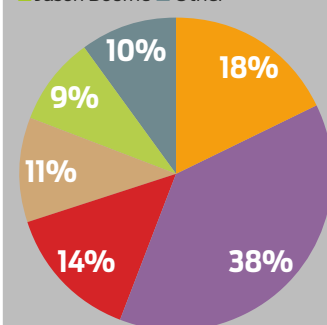
Goggins goes raiding

HCC favourite Walton Goggins has been hired to play the villain in MGM's forthcoming *Tomb Raider* reboot. Due to hit cinemas in Spring 2018, the film will see *Ex Machina*'s Alicia Vikander take on the role of treasure hunter Lara Croft.

We asked...

Which was your fave blockbuster in 2016?

- *Captain America: Civil War*
- *Deadpool* ■ *Star Trek Beyond*
- *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*
- *Jason Bourne* ■ Other*



Results from www.homecinemachoice.com
Go online for more polling action

* Other films that got at least one vote – *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, *X-Men: Apocalypse*, *Independence Day: Resurgence*, and *Suicide Squad*

It's a kind of magic...

Doctor Strange → Walt Disney Home Entertainment → DVD, Blu-ray & 3D Blu-ray

Marvel welcomes the latest addition to its gallery of heroes and villains in the shape of former neurosurgeon turned mystic whizz Stephen Strange (Benedict Cumberbatch). Hitting DVD, Blu-ray and 3D BD on March 6, *Doctor Strange* looks set to conjure up a fan-pleasing array of extras including a chat-track, five *Making of...* featurettes, the *Team Thor: Part 2* comedy short and an exclusive look at Marvel's upcoming 'Phase 3' movies.





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Danny Phillips, Home Cinema Choice, June 2016



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Face to Face

Topics of discussion on the HCC Facebook page

Dolby Vision Blu-rays and players...



Too much chopping and changing. People just can't keep changing their equipment.

Frank McDonnell

This kinda stuff p**ses off end users and confuses consumers!

Dean Gregory

So far 4K reminds me of Profile 1.0 when Blu-ray first came out. The original Sony player was useless and out of date the same month I bought it. I see my Samsung 4K player heading in the same direction but I will live with it for now. UHD BD was rushed to market and was clearly always going to be a moving target as far as specs go. As usual you can sit on the fence waiting for the next big thing or just dive in and enjoy it!

Adrian Naunton

What you're watching on your home cinema...



I've gone weird and wonderful – *The Neon Demon* and *High-Rise*!

Robert Corrigan

Star Trek Beyond 3D and *X-Men: Apocalypse* 3D for me.

Del Palmer

We got the *Game of Thrones* Blu-ray boxset (Season 1-6) for Christmas. Great show!

Jeffrey McCann

Blood Devils, *Blood of the Vampires*, *Assault on Precinct 13* and *The Haunting* on the bigscreen.

Alan Hoare

I'm currently watching the complete *Star Trek: Enterprise* Blu-ray boxset – and halfway through Season One.

James Gray



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Back of the 'net

Trailers, technology and more to check out on the web



The race is on again!

The *Death Race* franchise has been in a DTV holding pattern since rebooting in 2008. Now we have, confusingly, a direct sequel to the series original, dubbed *Death Race 2050*, that brings back the B-movie gore and budget. If this 'red-band' trailer whets your appetite, track down the new BD release. youtu.be/CF5mXmk8RuQ



Sony's 4K future

The UBP-X800 will be Sony's first Ultra HD Blu-ray player when it arrives this Spring. In this brief preview vid, Sony's AV guru and friend of the mag Eric Kingdon talks you through its key features, including SACD and DVD-A playback, hi-res file support and 4K streaming service integration. youtu.be/fgXql9XBqkE



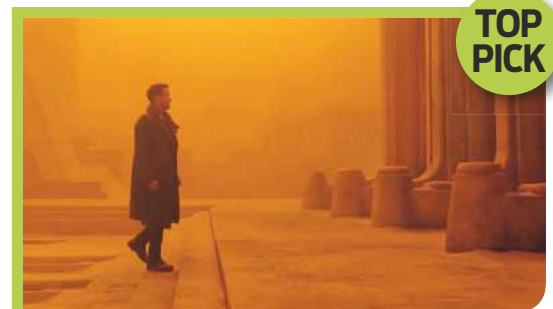
Don't answer the phone!

Twelve years since *Ring 2*, Paramount is releasing a third flick this February focusing on that creepy cursed video, which this time around seems to have been uploaded to the 'net. D'oh. The trailer also shows long-haired evil Samara sliding out from a flatscreen TV. So the tech is right, but will it be scary? youtu.be/p17DJBPRlC0



Celebrate with Dynaudio

Any good speaker brand worth its salt has a dedicated testing laboratory – here Dynaudio pops some champagne and gives you some insight into, and a tour of, its new R&D centre in Skanderborg in Denmark. Check out the robotic arm that can lift any speaker into place in the cube-shaped listening room. youtu.be/hPkv0v9Q8zY



TOP PICK

Ford perfect?

This teaser trailer for this year's *Blade Runner 2049* has been on repeat-watch in HCC towers. Everything from the Vangelis-style synth score to the rain-soaked neon-lit streets brings back happy memories of the original. And then Harrison Ford appears from the shadows... youtu.be/haXvp8M9Cog



Pull up a pew with LG

If you've ever wondered what it's like attending the trade-only CES show, LG has made video streams of its press conferences available. Here, company reps – and Technicolor's Sandra Carvahlo – discuss the brand's new OLED and Super UHD nano-cell TVs. youtu.be/vq81jzRS-Ps

'Look at the size of that thing!'

SVS PB16-Ultra → www.svssound.com



Fresh from picking up a CES Innovation Award, SVS's ported PB16-Ultra subwoofer (pictured) and its sealed sibling (the SB16) are now on sale in the UK via distributor Karma-AV. Both models utilise a stonking 16in driver and 1,500W RMS Sledge amplifier; users can tame these LFE beasts via a new control and DSP smartphone app with custom presets. The £2,900 PB16 claims a -3dB bass response down to 13Hz, while the £2,500 SB16 is rated to 16Hz. The brand says the subs are 'the culmination of all SVS design advancements.'

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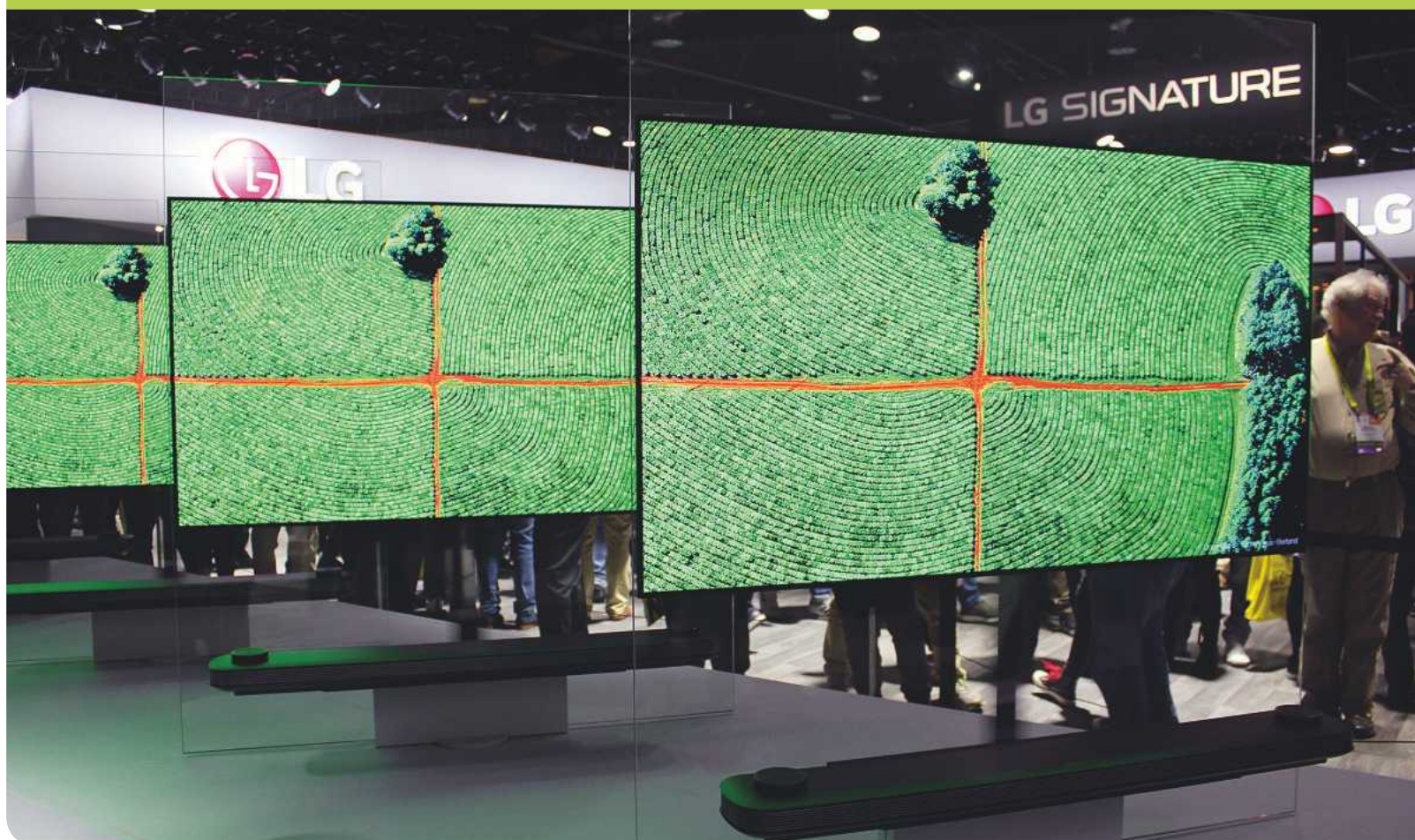
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OLED and Dolby Vision hit CES

The 50th anniversary of the world's biggest tech show saw TV companies celebrate with their best screens yet, reports **Steve May**

The first week of January once again witnessed the CES technology expo take up residence in the conference halls and hotel suites of Las Vegas. As usual, the world's major AV brands arrived and duly took the wraps off new hardware ranges for 2017. And, as usual, HCC was there to soak it all in.



The two big stories to come out of CES 2017 are surprisingly easy to pick. One is the surge in manufacturer and studio support for Dolby Vision HDR, which until now has loomed over its HDR 10 rival with menace but little actual living room presence. The other is OLED TV technology, which could be ready to make good on its promise to oust LED/LCD to the sidelines. Sure, Samsung debuted a startling new line of Quantum Dot LED TVs, audiophiles drooled over high-end DACs and

gadget-freaks made themselves dizzy with VR, but it's OLED and Dolby Vision that were the champions when it came to showfloor buzz.

OLED finds new friends

2017 will see OLED screen technology move from LG monopoly to multi-brand mainstay, as both Panasonic and Sony throw their weight behind it.

The competition for best showfloor image quality was tough, but Panasonic just edged it. The second-generation 65in EZ1000 OLED, to be known as the EZ1002 in the UK (the '2' denotes a Freeview Play tuner), is an astonishingly fine-looking display that almost perfectly mimics the Pro OLED monitors used in Hollywood authoring suites.

The EZ1002 even offers pro functionality. Colourists can upload their own 3D look-up tables (or colour values) by SD/USB memory.



Sony's A1 TV is the brand's first largescreen OLED



This allows the EZ1002 to be used in professional mastering suites.

When it comes to HDR, the set boasts a peak brightness of around 800 nits (twice that of Panasonic's original OLED model) and presents almost the full DCI/P3 colour space.

Key to its picture performance is the Studio Colour HCX2 processor, which employs 3D look-up tables derived from those used by Panasonic's professional filmmaking division. The processor also unlocks detail in near-blacks using techniques developed from its experience with plasma TVs. The screen will support HDR 10 and HLG (Hybrid Log-Gamma) HDR, expected to be used by UK broadcasters, but not Dolby Vision.

Panasonic UK Marketing Director David Preece isn't convinced the lack of Dolby HDR is an issue. 'It's not clear how many films will be supporting Dolby Vision,' he told *HCC*. 'HDR 10 is the industry standard.' Of more concern for buyers, he says, is the confusion brewing in nomenclature. 'OLED, QLED, ULED – that's what's going to be confusing.'

The EZ1002 panel is partnered by a Dynamic Blade speaker; an 80W soundbar that tethers to the main screen and has been engineered and tuned by Technics. This features 14 speaker units – eight woofers, four squawkers and two tweeters, plus a quad passive radiator to boost bass.

Sound, it seems, will be a big differentiator for the next wave of OLED TVs. Sony entered the market at CES with its Bravia A1, which will be available in 77in, 65in and 55in sizes, and flaunts an extremely minimalist design (there's not even a Sony logo on the front). And it has no visible speakers. That's because the A1 uses novel Acoustic Sound technology, wherein the screen radiates audio directly, energised by a pair of stereo transducers on



Toshiyuki Ogura says Sony's X1 Extreme processor is built for both OLED and LED



CES 2017, the largest yet, marked the tech show's 50th anniversary

the rear. To help fill in the sound, there's a woofer built into the TV's back stand.

HCC went for a private demo of the A1, and was surprised by just how effective this audio solution was. The screen may be vibrating, but there's no visual disturbance to the image. And as the subwoofer does much of the sonic heavy lifting, the audio feels full-range.

It's not just the audio that impresses. The A1 OLED employs Sony's X1 Extreme image processor, last seen on the flagship ZD9. While that TV was an LED set, the company's Chief Distinguished Engineer, Toshiyuki Ogura, explained that the X1 Extreme has been designed to maximise the performance of both LED and OLED displays. 'In addition to the panel driver, our chip has an input signal analyser which knows the characteristics of different display devices,' he revealed. 'That means it can match the input stream with any panel, and get a higher picture performance. It works with any kind of signal, giving maximum contrast.'

One of the tricks of the X1 Extreme is automatic HDR upscaling for SDR sources. In action, it effortlessly emphasised detail and dynamics.

As for HDR flavours the A1 will support Dolby Vision HDR, in addition to HDR 10 and HLG.

LG: the OLED O.G.

Elsewhere at CES, original OLED advocate LG wowed with its so-called wallpaper (because it's so thin) W screen. The flagship of the brand's 2017 OLED lineup, the W will be available in 65in and 77in iterations and is just 2.57mm thin. In fact, it's so light you can attach it to your wall with a magnetic mount.

Ingeniously, all the TV's tuner electronics have been shifted to the accompanying soundbar, which also offers Dolby Atmos decoding. Two height drivers automatically pop up when required. No UK prices have been set for the W series yet, but the 65in model is expected to sell in the US for \$8,000.

LG remains keen on propagating HDR variants. In addition to HDR 10, HLG and Dolby Vision, it has now added support for Technicolor's Advanced HDR format. Quite what use this will be is anybody's



LG unwrapped its first Ultra HD Blu-ray player, the UP970



Samsung's QLED range promises brightness levels up to 2,000 nits

guess, but as part of the deal, the company has reportedly secured floorspace in Technicolor's mastering suites. Make of that what you will.

This was a good CES for Dolby Labs. Not only did Sony announce support for Dolby Vision on its OLED debutant, it also promised a firmware update for last year's ZD9 TV. While early DV compatibility came via dedicated chipsets, Dolby has been busy developing a software implementation. It now seems if you have the right silicon, Dolby Vision (which employs a 12-bit signal and dynamic metadata) can be implemented.

Yet while Sony added DV to its TVs, the brand's first UHD Blu-ray player, the UBP-X800, is excluded. LG didn't miss this trick though. Its debut 4K spinner, the incoming UP970, will get a DV update via firmware later in the year.

And just to confuse things, LG announced its own Active HDR technology, which adds dynamic metadata to HLG and HDR 10 content, supposedly to enhance the HDR performance of these static metadata formats.

The hardware unveilings from Sony and LG dovetailed nicely with news from Dolby that three Hollywood studios – Universal Pictures, Lionsgate and Warner Bros – have pledged to release movies mastered in Dolby Vision on Ultra HD Blu-ray. Warner and Universal have already made some of their movies available in DV via the Vudu streaming service in the US, and in Summer 2016 Lionsgate confirmed it would be issuing Dolby Vision content, but didn't specifically mention physical discs. Now it's clear that such souped-up UHD platters are just around the corner.

As yet, though, no titles have been announced. Universal says it is prepping 'an impactful selection' of films (its catalogue of DV releases on Vudu includes the likes of *Lucy* and *Jason Bourne*).

Among existing Warner titles already streaming in DV are 2016 big-hitters *Suicide Squad* and *Sully*.

Samsung QLED: Bucking the trend

And what of Samsung? At CES the Korean corp embarked on a massive rebrand for its Quantum Dot UHD screens at CES, which are now to be known as QLED. SUHD is no more.

Utilising a new metal core Quantum Dot tech, the company claims it has raised the peak luminance of HDR to 2,000 nits on select models, as well as improving off-axis viewability. Behind closed doors, Samsung engineers also stressed the expanded colour volume they can deliver through QLED, shooting a high-end screen out with a rival OLED. This top-flight tech will appear on the brand's Q9 (flat), Q8 (curved) and Q7 (flat or curved) models.

However, unlike LG and Sony, Samsung kept a lid on HDR flavours, sticking with HDR 10 and promising support for HLG. As with Panasonic, it is steering clear of Dolby Vision – for the time being at least ■

8K arrives at CES. Again

Do you need more pixels?



8K resolution (7,680 x 4,320) screens once again teased CES attendees with ultra-realistic detail. But perhaps this year they looked a little more production-ready than before. Hisense showed a 65in model, the LED65MU9800V, which appeared extremely impressive; rival Chinese brand Changhong had a super-slim 65in set. Is 8K going to launch in China first? It seems likely.



CES: where the tech world goes to get its head down...

Suicide Squad: Already a Dolby Vision streaming title in the US





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Richard Stevenson, Home Cinema Choice

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NEW MOVIES

Because sometimes you just can't wait for the Blu-ray release, **Team HCC** picks out the sci-fi sequels, superhero smashes, car capers, war dramas, fright flicks, family films and low-budget lures coming to a multiplex near you this year



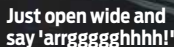
No film franchise has grown so large from humble beginnings. Where the first *F&F* movie was little more than *Point Break* with cars, this seventh sequel promises (going by the first trailer) Lamborghinis on ice, submarines, tanks and a giant wrecking ball. Not to mention the likes of Vin Diesel, Charlize Theron, Jason Statham and Dwayne Johnson going at it hammer and tongs. The more recent franchise entries have become firm favourites by virtue of their pushed-up-to-eleven action scenes. Hopefully this will follow suit.

In cinemas: May 19

There's a school of thought that believes Ridley Scott's *Alien* prequel *Prometheus* was a fine, if slightly oblique, sci-fi that would have benefitted from more (okay, just some) actual Xenomorphs. This follow-up looks likely to please such thinkers.

Scott returns (as well as cast member Michael Fassbender) for another space-set tale of terror, and first impressions are that this looks much more akin to his 1979 smash *Alien* – and the referential title is there to push that fact home. If you want chest-bursters and face-huggers, then you've come to the right place.

Scott has plans for another two movies in the series before drawing it to a close, which means that while a UHD Blu-ray release is almost certain, so too is a lavish boxset somewhere down the line.



Expect more well-dressed, Atmos-fuelled outlandish spy thrills in this sequel that was quickly ear-marked following the huge box office success in 2014 of *...The Secret Service*, which pulverised punters with its cartoonish violence and expertly-staged set-pieces, and courted controversy with one fight sequence in particular. With Fox giving its predecessor an Ultra HD Blu-ray outing, it's likely this will also eventually receive the A-grade disc treatment.

Blade Runner 2049

In cinemas: October 6

A follow-up to 1982's cult sci-fi noir *Blade Runner* has been planned for over a decade, but only began filming last year with original director Ridley Scott in the producer's chair and hot property Denis Villeneuve (*Sicario*, *Arrival*) behind the camera. Ryan Gosling heads an A-list cast that includes Harrison Ford reprising his role as Blade Runner/maybe a replicant Rick Deckard.

As for the plot, details are being kept under wraps beyond the movie being set in 2049 (30 years after the first flick) and returning to Los Angeles. There's no doubt it'll look sumptuous, though, with cinematographer Roger Deakins given IMAX cameras to capture all those dystopian cityscapes.

Ryan Gosling goes for a quick 'Joi' ride with co-star Ana de Armas



Ghost in the Shell

In cinemas: March 31

Fans of the original anime probably have right to be fearful of this Hollywood remix, but from early footage this live-action update appears to be sticking pretty close to the look and feel of the source material. The biggest change, obviously, is the casting of Scarlett Johansson in the lead role of 'The Major', but at least ScarJo has proved her action chops in *Lucy* and Marvel's superhero epics. And if it's a dud, there's always the 1995 anime to enjoy, which is touring UK cinemas again this year.



Baywatch

In cinemas: June 2

No one in their right mind thinks the David Hasselhoff vehicle *Baywatch* deserves a faithful bigscreen adaptation. Thankfully, neither do the producers of this forthcoming jolly starring Dwayne Johnson. Instead, the tropes of that '90s TV stalwart are being used as the basis for an action comedy with tongue firmly in tanned, toned, Californian cheek.

One to look out for if you found the *21 Jump Street* and *Starsky and Hutch* movies more enjoyable than their telly box ancestors.



Transformers: The Last Knight

In cinemas: June 23

Once more unto the breach, dear Autobots. Said to be the last time Michael Bay will take charge of a *Transformers* flick, this fifth slice of heavy metal action will rumble into multiplexes off the back of a mammoth \$260m budget. Hopefully that will translate to jaw-dropping scenes of cinematic destruction and a skull-crushing Dolby Atmos soundmix. Whether or not it results in a plot that holds up to scrutiny remains to be seen. It may be a case of disengage brain, engage senses.



Star Wars: Episode VIII

In cinemas: December 15

After the side-dish of *Rogue One* the *Star Wars* universe returns to its main course, focusing on the continuing exploits of Rey, Kylo Ren and uber-Jedi Luke Skywalker, and with *Looper* director Rian Johnson given the keys to the kingdom. With the 'net already awash with rumours concerning the plot and the various familial relationships of its main players, our advice is to hunker down for the next eleven months, ignore everything, and let the opening text crawl roll. Oh, and book into an IMAX screening if you can.

Kong: Skull Island

In cinemas: March 10

Peter Jackson's *King Kong* was a wonderfully realised update on the classic big beast movie, but presented as an entirely standalone project. That's not the case with this year's reboot, which has been explicitly created with an eye on a Kong v Godzilla showdown in 2020. That's right, we're in 'cinematic universe' territory again.

Plot-wise... well, we're looking at a largescale team of scientists/military personnel investigating a mysterious island and stumbling upon an outsized ape. Early trailers suggest it wants to be a cross between *Apocalypse Now* and *Predator*, which seems great until you remember that's what you thought about *Jurassic Park III*. Tom Hiddleston brings the serious acting, Samuel L. Jackson provides the one-liners.



Skull Island: not the sort of place to book a week's holiday



Dunkirk

In cinemas: July 21

Christopher Nolan has chosen the WWII evacuation of Dunkirk (which saw over 300,000 Allied troops rescued from the French harbour town while besieged by German forces) as his follow-up to *Interstellar*, and he's retaining the 'big is best' mantra of that cerebral sci-fi – filming has employed both IMAX and 65mm film cameras.

So, here's a film that should be a real feast for your eyeballs, while its true-life tale of remarkable heroism ought to grip you, too. We're all set for a slam-dunk Summer hit, then, as long as Nolan can avoid the legions of cinemagoers once again complaining about hard-to-discern dialogue...



War for the Planet of the Apes

In cinemas: July 14

Caesar (Andy Serkis) returns in this third instalment in Fox's franchise, which will see the battle between simians and humans move up a notch since the events of the brilliant *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*. Director Matt Reeves is also back swinging his cameras from the trees, while post-production work will prep this to screen in Dolby Cinema (a heady cocktail of Dolby Vision and Dolby Atmos). Unfortunately we're still waiting for a UK chain to embrace that format, so you might need to wait for the 4K Blu-ray to see it in its intended glory.

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Spider-Man: Homecoming

In cinemas: July 7

Fresh from mixing it up with the Avengers in *Captain America: Civil War*, the latest bigscreen incarnation of Spider-Man swings into his first solo outing this Summer. Thankfully skipping the whole origin story thing, this collaboration between Marvel Studios and Sony Pictures finds Peter Parker (Tom Holland) struggling to strike a balance between high school life and superheroics. The film will also introduce Michael Keaton as the Vulture, a much more menacing birdman than the one he received so many awards for playing a couple of years ago, and Iron Man (Robert Downey, Jr.) will pop by to help maintain continuity with the rest of the Marvel world. This could have all the right ingredients to restore Spidey to the top tier of cinema after the disappointment of his last two efforts.

Spidey will never keep his identity a secret if he will insist on taking off his mask



Thor: Ragnarok

In cinemas: October 27

Poor old Thor. For some reason the God of Thunder just doesn't get the same amount of love as the other Avengers. Perhaps this third solo movie could change all that. It certainly has an intriguing premise: Thor will have to stop the ruthless Hela (Cate Blanchett) from destroying Asgard, a task made all the more difficult once he's been imprisoned on the far side of the universe without his mighty hammer. And before he can get it back he'll have to triumph over fellow Avenger the Hulk in gladiatorial combat. Now, come on, doesn't that sound awesome? Throw Doctor Strange in too and *Thor: Ragnarok* looks set to be a divine Marvel blockbuster.



Guardians of the Galaxy: Vol. 2

In cinemas: April 28

A sequel to Marvel's fun-filled comic sci-fi sounds like a grand idea to Team HCC. After all, the first *Guardians of the Galaxy* blended razor-sharp humour with heart-pounding set-pieces, jazzed it all up with a 1970s-infused soundtrack, and then crash-landed on Blu-ray with an awe-inspiring soundmix. More of that and we'll be happy, so it's good news that director James Gunn and the principal cast (including Vin Diesel as Groot) are all back on board. Plot-wise... well it could be about anything really. We're not fussed.



Wonder Woman

In cinemas: June 2

Before she teams up with the rest of the Justice League [right], the breakout star of 2016's *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* gets to do her own work in this origin tale from director Patty Jenkins. Taking place during World War I, we'll see Amazon princess Diana (Gal Godot) venturing out into the wider world to help stop the conflict at the behest of a US pilot (Chris Pine) who crashes on her island home. This war-filled setting presents plenty of opportunities for fan-pleasing action sequences, and should ensure that its Dolby Atmos mix is every bit as wonder-ful as its heroine.



Justice League

In cinemas: November 17

Batman! Superman! Wonder Woman! Aquaman! The Flash! Cyborg! If you're familiar with all six of those DC heroes then you've probably already got *Justice League*'s November release date scribbled in your Daily Planet memo pad. Others, however, may want to rewatch *Batman v Superman* (keep an eye out for the cameos) and catch *Wonder Woman* to get up to speed before this ensemble epic hits cinemas.

Zack Snyder directs once more, and Ben Affleck and Henry Cavill reprise their roles as Bats and Supes. It'll therefore be interesting to see if this shares the stylings and brooding nature of *BvS* or if any attempt has been made to lighten the tone. Or, in other words, ape Marvel's success with the *Avengers* films.



Logan

In cinemas: March 3

This will be the ninth and final time Hugh Jackman appears on screen as *X-Men* bruiser Wolverine. Using Mark Millar's 2008 *Old Man Logan* comic as its inspiration neatly side-steps the fact Jackman isn't getting any younger; it also gives the standalone Wolverine series (of which this is the last part of the trilogy) another direction to turn to pursue the darker nature for which it's been praised. You can look forward to the sight of a mutant beginning to lose his powers in this future-set tale; you can also look forward to an 'R-rated' actioner, as 20th Century Fox (buoyed by the success of *Deadpool*) has decided to aim this flick at a grown-up audience.

Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets

In cinemas: August 4

Luc Besson returns to the sci-fi genre more than twenty years after his dazzling *The Fifth Element*, using a long-running French comic book series as source material. Dane DeHaan and Cara Delevingne lead as time-and-space travelling protectors of humanity, in a monster-budget galactic opera that might – just might – give the *Star Wars* franchise a run for its money. Or it could be a *Jupiter Ascending*-style flop. Either way, we've got *Valerian...* pegged as pure AV spectacle, and have fingers crossed it will result in a home platter as essential as the UHD release of 2014's *Lucy*.

With 21 volumes of the comic available, any *Valerian* film franchise could run for years...



Child's play

On the horizon this year for junior AV-Holics...

Cars 3



In cinemas: July 14

Pixar revs up another Lightning McQueen adventure. It'll look and sound fantastic, but most of us really just want a sequel to *WALL-E*.

Despicable Me 3

In cinemas: June 30

Another third-outing 'toon, with the CG whizzes at Illumination Entertainment bringing Gru and his Minions back for further madcap antihero heroics.

Paddington 2

In cinemas: November 10

2014's *Paddington* found the sweet spot between child-friendly ursine antics and gags that could be appreciated by an adult audience. This year's sequel will hopefully repeat the trick.

Beauty and the Beast



In cinemas: March 17

Walt Disney is unleashing another live-action version of one of its popular 'toons. Emma Watson is the titular beauty, opposite several million quids' worth of SFX.

Jumanji



In cinemas: December 29

It's Dwayne Johnson again! This time the beefed-up thesp is wisecracking his way through a spiritual sequel to the 1995 hit about a magical board game.

A magical Android app might make more sense these days...



King Arthur: Legend of the Sword

In cinemas: May 12

From *Lock, Stock...* through *Sherlock Holmes* and *Man From U.N.C.L.E.*, Guy Ritchie has proven he's a director comfortable in any genre, and always willing to bring something new to the table. That'll be The Round Table in this case, with Ritchie helming an adaptation of the King Arthur legend that could be even more bonkers than John Boorman's *Excalibur*, delivering an origin story in which Arthur starts out as a Cockney criminal. UK actor Charlie Hunnam will lift the sword from the stone; keep your eyes peeled for a David Beckham cameo.



Free Fire

In cinemas: March 31

There's a definite whiff of vintage Tarantino about the trailer for Ben (High-Rise) Wheatley's latest. Boasting an ensemble cast that includes Cillian Murphy, Brie Larson, Armie Hammer and Sharlto Copley, *Free Fire* sees an abandoned warehouse turned into full-on war zone following a difference of opinion between a gang of criminals and arms dealers. Inspired by Wheatley and co-writer Amy Jump's love of hard-boiled crime movies, and described as having the same 'no-nonsense feel you get in Sam Peckinpah's *The Getaway*,' *Free Fire* is shaping up to be an action movie treat for those with a penchant for old-school thrills.



The Mummy

In cinemas: June 9

Tom Cruise is continuing his mission to be in as many film franchises as possible by signing up for the first part of Universal's new 'classic monsters' series, which reawakens the Mummy but gives previous star Brendan Fraser the boot. If all goes well, movies centred around Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde, the Invisible Man, the Wolf Man, the Bride of Frankenstein and Dracula will follow.

Arriving bang in the middle of the Summer, this looks more like a typical tentpole blockbuster than a creepy horror, with action flitting from Egypt to London and plenty of the scenes of massive destruction that cinema-goers crave. That said, it also appears to be turning away from the camp humour that blighted Universal's 2004 *Van Helsing* movie, which is probably good news.



Elle

In cinemas: March 10

After a 10-year break from films, director Paul Verhoeven is back and just as controversial as ever. This French-language thriller stars Isabelle Huppert as the head of a videogame company who is assaulted in her home by an unknown attacker and sets about hunting him down. Although *Elle* is unlikely to match the box office success of past Verhoeven blockbusters like *Total Recall*, the international performance of his 2006 World War II flick *Black Book* showed that his output can still attract a crowd. And as *Elle* began 2017 with Golden Globe wins for Best Actress and Best Foreign Language Film, it should garner attention when it finally arrives in UK theatres.



It

In cinemas: September 8

Stephen King and feature films have a difficult relationship. The horror author's catalogue has spawned a handful of essential adaptations (*Carrie*, *The Shining*, *Misery*...), and a number of low-quality flops (remember *The Mangler*?). Aiming to rank amongst the former will be New Line Cinema's *It*. Of course, we've been here before with the two-part TV series of 1990, but this time out the production will focus on the earlier '60s-set parts of King's mammoth novel and its child protagonists (saving their adult adventures for a potential sequel). A wise move, perhaps, considering the school-age leads of Netflix's recent hit *Stranger Things*.



Pirates of the Caribbean 5

In cinemas: May 26

Disney hoists the main sail and embarks on a fifth salty adventure with Johnny Depp starring as weirdo seafarer Captain Jack Sparrow. Coming six years after the last *Pirates...*, this entry (subtitled *Dead Men Tell No Tales*) will have to work hard to remind cinemagoers why the franchise has previously proved such a money-spinner – giving new-to-the-series directors Joachim Rønning and Espen Sandberg a \$300m kitty to play with seems like a risky move, plus Depp's attraction is possibly on the wane. Still, if it packs the right blend of action and gentle laughs, this could be another mega-hit.



The Dark Tower

In cinemas: July 28

After a decade full of false starts (one of which involved a trilogy of films and a TV series to fill in the gaps in the story), the fantasy-western-horror epic from Stephen King (him again) is hitting cinemas this year. However, rather than adapt any of King's eight novels in the *Dark Tower* series, the movie will serve as a sequel of sorts to the final volume. Actual plot details are being kept hush-hush, but we do know gunslinging protagonist Roland Deschain (Idris Elba) will be on a quest to reach the Dark Tower and defeat an evil sorcerer (Matthew McConaughey). If the final few books are anything to go by, you can also expect lots of nods and winks towards other King novels ■

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10 signs you're a home cinema hero

You have an eagle-eye for frame interpolation and retain your retro hardware. That, and more, makes you a winner in the world of AV. **Steve May** lays down the law

1 Only you can work your system

The additional power amp. The Darbee Darblet. The trio of media players, all necessary to cover esoteric file formats. Over the years you've assembled a home cinema of such fearsome complexity that successful operation is beyond the talents of mere mortals (or other family members, basically). Of course, it doesn't help that you insist on still using seven individual remotes, and haven't bothered to relabel the HDMI inputs on your AVR – but that's only an issue when you're not around to cue up a Blu-ray. Which hardly ever happens, as you're in your cinema room every day...

2 If you go out to the cinema, you have a favourite screen

You love the movies, but the stress of finding yourself in an unfamiliar theatre, with bad lighting, uncomfortable seats and poor presentation can really take the edge off the latest blockbuster. That's why you insist on patronising a specific cinema or multiplex screen – and even have your own favourite row and seat to boot. Woe betides anyone that parks their unworthy carcass in your sonically optimum chair, or denies you the perfect eyeball-to-screen viewing distance. And once ensconced you're going to sit in that seat until hell freezes over (or the house lights go up), even when you know there's no post-credits sequence imminent.



If your AV room doesn't look like this, you wish it did

3 There are unwrapped Blu-rays on your disc shelf...

Live. Buy. Repeat. It's a curious fact that all those DVDs you bought that never left their cellophane wrappers are now being joined in your library by the very same movies on Blu-ray and UHD disc – and they're just as unwrapped. You should be concerned, but you're not. At some point you'll open and play these pristine prizes – it's just a matter of time – and they look lovely sitting there anyway.

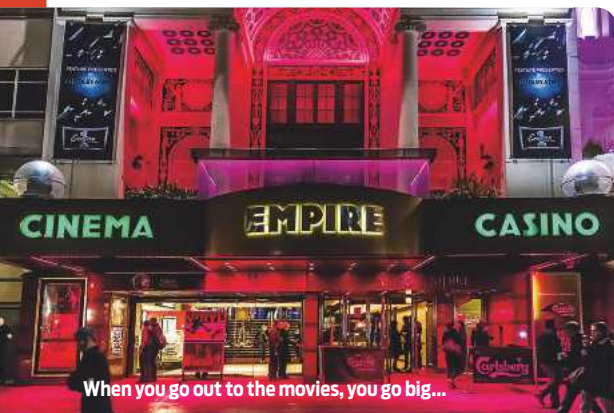
In fact, your only regret is that you don't also have unwrapped VHS tapes and LaserDiscs to complete the collection – pre-BBFC certification tapes now command a fortune on the collectors' market, and LDs are far too pretty to sell.

4 ...and your disc collection has an order that only you know

Really, what's the fuss? It obviously makes perfect sense to stack *The Magnificent Seven* alongside Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*, and your imported boxset of *The Adventures of Brisco County, Jr* beside multiple copies of *The Evil Dead* and its sequels. After all, how else would you find the Sam



Disc shelf



When you go out to the movies, you go big...

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You say...

What *HCC* readers have done for the love of AV

I watched all three extended edition *LOTR* movies in one sitting. It took about 11 3/4 hours. I loved every minute and was surprised at how much more you pick up in the story that you miss when watching them over time.

Steve Old

In 2006 I entered the THX 'make a trailer' competition and shot a live-action 60-second trailer. The trailer was called *Audience* and was one of the winners on the website, but later on they remastered it in 5.1 for the official THX demo disc. You guys actually gave it away with your magazine years ago!

Arron Dennis

I built a home cinema shed in my garden!

Paul Slim



Like *HCC* reader Matt Bridger, you can never have too many discs – or too much movie memorabilia



LaserDisc: fan-favourite format

Raimi *Spider-Man* trilogy? All offers to re-arrange your discs in alphabetical order are politely declined (this despite your habit of grouping all Japanese anime together as if under 'A'), and you positively refuse to explain why all new titles are routinely quarantined in a stack by the Blu-ray player for a minimum of four months.

5 You still have a LaserDisc player. Somewhere

True home cinema enthusiasts never throw any hardware out, ever – and one day you'll rescue your LD spinner from the back of the loft for some old-school AV thrills, if it's not still in your kit rack. There are many reasons why you cherish it, but probably *numero uno* is the fact that your giant *Star Wars* LaserDisc THX boxset remains the best version available of the original *Star Wars* trilogy before George Lucas decided to doctor them with shonky digital effects. That and the fact those early Dolby Digital 5.1 LaserDisc soundtracks still sound inexplicably better than the majority of their DVD and Blu-ray counterparts.

6 You're the AV expert for friends and family

It's a role you embrace with quiet joy. From sorting out basic system hookups ('You really shouldn't still be using a Scart lead...') to 'No, you really should turn off HDMI CEC control on principle') to setting up wireless multiroom audio systems, you're the guru everyone goes to when they need some assistance getting their home entertainment hardware to function. It's a thankless role, typically repaid only in tea and biscuits, but job satisfaction is high. And you know it won't be long before you're called on to fix HDR connection issues, but you're confident that you'll have worked out just how to do that before the rest of the world comes knocking on your door for HDCP 2.2 aid.

7 You can immediately tell when someone else has fiddled with your TV's settings

It's uncanny, but you instinctively know when someone has been messing around in your TV's menus. Your seasoned peepers can spot ghastly frame interpolation a mile off. With its soap opera-effect sheen, high frame rate processing makes even the world's most expensive blockbusters look like they originated on DV tape. Some might admire the superficial sharpness, but purists know better – particularly when it introduces motion artefacts

that can be spotted from outer space. You also have the finely-honed ability to identify all your set's picture modes without recourse to the preset menu – but no one is actually impressed with this party trick.

8 You once spent a whole day testing subwoofer placement and EQ

Well, someone has to. But what's not to like about experimenting with room boundaries and DIY bass traps in pursuit of luxurious LFE? One of your favourite tricks is to park your subwoofer at the listening position and then crawl around the room to hear where it sounds best (you then move the sub to that position and reclaim your recliner). This best location is hardly ever convenient, and it's a bit embarrassing when someone catches you in the act, but the price is worth paying.

9 Your movie den has a prime seat – and it's yours

You may have calibrated your AV receiver for all the seats in your viewing room – Audyssey's popular MultEQ XT32 room equaliser will measure and aggregate up to eight listening positions – but you know there's an ultra-sweet sweet spot where everything is just a little more honed. That's your throne and there's a calibrated posterior dent in it to prove ownership. It's from here that surround sound really engulfs, where the best bass slam impacts like a *T-Rex* footfall and where nothing distracting is reflected in the bigscreen. The challenge is not to let anyone else cotton on to the fact...

10 Your dog reads *HCC*...

Because [like reader Gary Thompson's] they know they have to wait until the credits roll before it's time for walks ■



Make your own sub-woofer joke...

Crossing the Meridian line

A UK install team headed out to Thailand to put together this gorgeous theatre, and took some UK speakers with them



KIT CHECKLIST

JVC: DLA-X9000 projector, with Panamorph anamorphic lens

SCREEN RESEARCH: 2.35:1 fixed-frame projector screen (3m)

MERIDIAN: 2 x DSP7200SE (front left/right); 1 x DSP7200 HC SE (centre channel); 4 x DSP320 in-ceiling speakers; 2 x DSP640 in-wall speakers; 4 x DSW subwoofers

MERIDIAN: 861v8 surround controller; HD621 processor

KALEIDESCAPE: Movie server, disc vault and players

FORTRESS: 3 x Kensington seats (Lexington arms); 3 x Kensington seats (Odeon arms)

D-BOX: 6 x actuators for seating; controller



LONDON'S NV INTEGRATION is the custom install specialist responsible for this coolly-designed home cinema room, actually located thousands of miles away in Bangkok, Thailand (the company is aiming to open an office in Asia this year).

The room features a best-of-British 7.4.4-channel system from Meridian Audio, using Special Edition versions of the brand's DSP7200 loudspeakers for the front L/C/R soundstage, plus in-wall and in-ceiling models and a quartet of subwoofers. Every speaker and subwoofer finish was chosen to match the wall surfaces of the cinema, via Meridian's bespoke Select service.

Handling visuals is a JVC DLA-X9000 projector. To reduce noise, the PJ is located in an external space, firing through an optical glass. A Panamorph anamorphic lens is employed to maintain constant height images on the 2.35:1 projector screen. Content comes via a phalanx of Kaleidescape Premiere hardware, stashed in a kit rack.

The room has been sonically tuned, too. Wall-mounted panels provide absorption and diffusion in precise locations. Even the deep pile carpet was chosen with an ear for room acoustics.

Finishing touches that catch the eye are the star ceiling and colour-matched seating. The latter also includes a surprise in the shape of D-Box integration, making this a room that's ready to rumble! ■ ➤

A. Wide-eyed entertainment

A 2.35:1 aspect ratio screen is installed, ideal for CinemaScope movies

B. Star-struck

Let's face it, no high-end private theatre is complete without a star ceiling...

C. Special speakers

For the left and right channels, the cinema uses Meridian's active floorstanding DSP7200SE flagship models – each features a pair of 8in bass drivers, a 6.25in midbass driver and a 1in beryllium dome tweeter. The centre channel (DSP7200 HC SE) is hidden behind custom panels





D. Beaming in

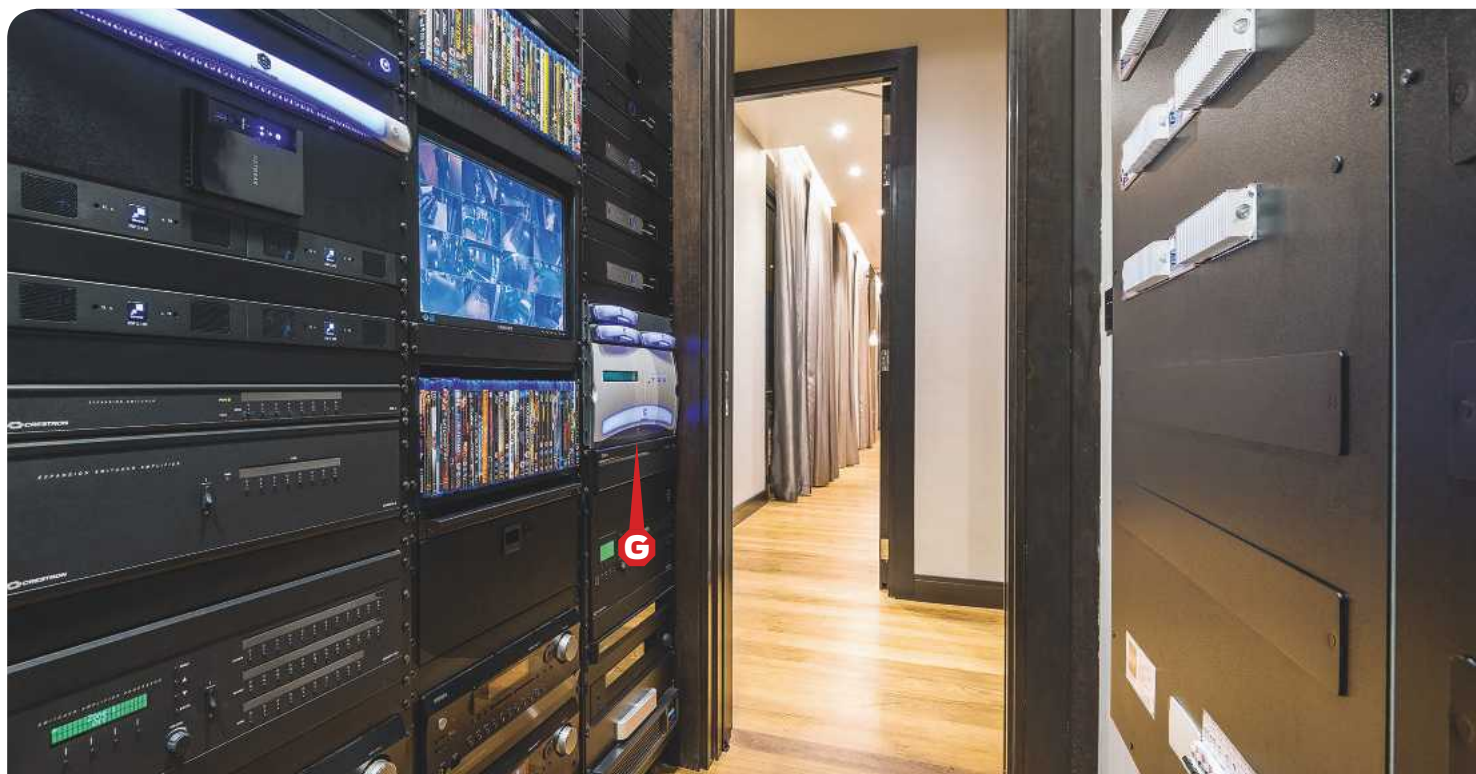
The high-end JVC DLA-X9000 projector (which offers 4K e-Shift and HDR playback) is situated behind optical glass in a purpose-built space to limit noise leakage

E, F. Moving feast

All six of the room's Fortress seats are equipped with D-Box actuators for that extra dimension of movie enjoyment (a motion controller resides in the kit rack). The chairs also hide motorised tray tables, should you want to lay out a banquet while gorging on Blu-rays

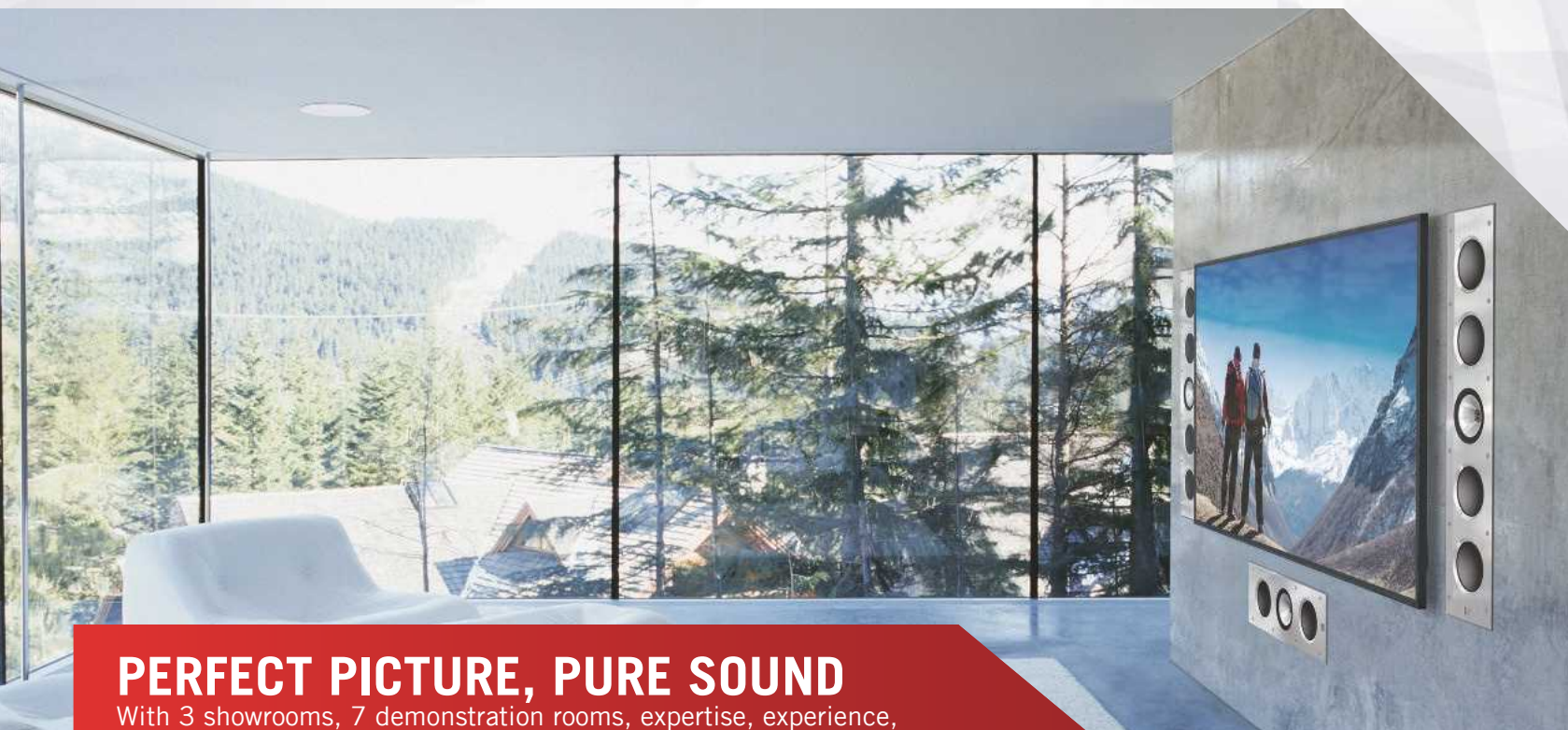
G. Load 'em up

Kaleidescape Premiere hardware, including a 325-disc Blu-ray server, disc vault and a trio of players, provides instant access to the owner's film collection – and there's shelf space in the boot room for their library, too





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REVIEWS

→ **HARDWARE** **OPPO** UDP-203 Ultra HD Blu-ray player **EPSON** 4K-enhanced HDR LCD projector **SAMSUNG** 43in 4K TV **CAMBRIDGE AUDIO** Second-generation soundbase speaker **SONY** Flagship Ultra HD home cinema PJ **HUMAX** Streamer/Freeview Play multiroom box **AMAZON** Echo Dot speaker **GROUPTEST** Four premium soundbars go head-to-head **AND MORE!**

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Denon's AVR-X6300H will drive a 7.1.4 speaker setup. Got one of those? Head to p44 to see if this is the one-stop solution you're looking for...

HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

All prices quoted are approximate and may have changed



AV INFO

PRODUCT:

Universal Ultra HD Blu-ray player

POSITION:

Oppo's new second-tier model; a bigger brother is due later this year

PEERS:

LG UP970;
Panasonic UB900

1. The UDP-203 supports SACD and DVD-A discs

2. A new HDR button on the backlit Oppo remote cycles through output options

Mark Craven goes looking for crouching tigers and hidden dragons in Oppo's new 4K BD player

One with an eye on the future?

It's been a while since Oppo had a new disc-player – its previous hardware, the BDP-103D, launched in 2013. The arrival of the UDP-203 is therefore exciting for fans of the brand, not least because it supports Ultra HD Blu-ray...

Neither mass market-proposition nor cost-no-object high-end deck, the UDP-203 has landed with a retail price of £650. This still makes it the most expensive 4K disc

spinner around. The question is: is it worth it? And what does your money get you?

Firstly, it gets you a universal machine. The UDP-203 will play Super Audio CDs and DVD-A's, as well as DVDs, 1080p Blu-rays and their UHD cousins. This is an entirely sensible move by Oppo, as it makes the player an effective replacement for

the also universal BDP-103D.

Not that all features remain the same. Gone, for instance, is Darbee post-processing, plus any video-on-



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demand apps. You'll need another avenue for iPlayer, Netflix, etc. Connectivity is slightly different too; while the player still offers HDMI in as well as out, there's now only one input (rear-mounted) as opposed to two. USB inputs have been upgraded to 3.0.

The player's full list of connections runs to: dual HDMI outputs, that single rear-mounted HDMI input; a trio of USB ports (one on the front panel); optical and coaxial digital audio outs; stereo/multichannel (7.1) analogue out; Ethernet; and RS232, IR and trigger terminals. There's also built-in Wi-Fi.

As before, the Oppo packs media player functionality, both locally and over a network. File support includes hi-res FLAC, ALAC, WAV and DSD, buoyed by an onboard AKM AK4458VN eight-channel 32-bit DAC.

Styling of the player is practically identical to the BDP-103D. Power, eject and transport controls adorn the brushed metal exterior. The disc tray is located centrally. The player is full-width, and reasonably hefty. It feels very much like a relative of the Oppo machines that came before it.

During my time with the UDP-203 I pulled two firmware updates down from the mothership (the later via USB as it hadn't yet been 'pushed' over the network). The first, I'm told, rectified a playback issue with Sony projectors. The second tweaked all manner of features (a full list can be found on the Oppo website). Oppo seems to be heavily involved in ironing out bugs and tuning performance, and owners are advised to keep an eye on firmware patches coming down the pipe.



Perhaps the most important update is still to come, of course – the one that will enable the deck to play forthcoming UHD Blu-rays with Dolby Vision HDR. Oppo was at first coy about this, suggesting it was a possibility, but post-CES has confirmed the update will be made available 'early 2017.'

Once available firmware was in place, the UDP-203 fulfilled its promise as a quality disc-player. Some issues were resolved, ranging from the minor (at first the user interface didn't 'wraparound' so that once on the far right side of options, you had to traipse all the way back to the left side) to performance-affecting (a curious, infrequent stuttering, noticeable with *Ghostbusters* before the update but unable to replicate after).

Vampire slayer

With *I Am Legend* (UHD Blu-ray), the Oppo reveals a steady hand and clear, high-pixel count glory. As Will Smith stalks the deserted streets of *Manhattan*, textures in the background buildings and abandoned cars are widely apparent, and close-ups of his face as he readies his hunting rifle show the pits in his skin and where he's missed a bit with his razor. Sunlight reflecting from windows and rays piercing through skyscrapers zing in that HDR way.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (UHD Blu-ray) is an even better showcase, with the Oppo lapping up its pristine, filmic 4K transfer. There are scenes and shots in this remastered cult classic that look simply exquisite here, with exemplary detail, lush primary colours and fine shadow rendition.

Of course, the varying quality and subtleties of 4K HDR platters can make for a somewhat maddening experience, so where the UDP-203 will appeal to tweekers is with its user video adjustment tools, which are the most comprehensive seen on a 4K deck to date.

Firstly, the player has a selectable 8-bit, 10-bit or 12-bit output (plus an automated setting via HDMI handshaking). This allows you to choose the option best-suited to your display. Typically, 10-bit (that which UHD BDs are mastered to) would be a sensible default. Selectable colour sampling rates (4:2:0, 4:2:2 and 4:4:4) are also offered. Again, there's an auto setting for those happy to be put in the Oppo's hands.

Also useful is the player's ability to run HDR in SDR conversion mode, regardless of the abilities of the display at the other end (something Samsung's UBD-K8500 can't do). But there's another mode on the menu (Strip Metadata) that's not mentioned in the user manual at all. This is described by Oppo as an 'experimental feature' (and still being tweaked), designed to be used by projector owners who want to avoid their beamer kicking into high lamp mode, but retaining the BT2020 colour space and wide colour information of a 4K disc. Of course, as the HDR metadata contains the EOTF (electro-optical transfer function) that directs the projector to map data to suit colour and luminance properties, Oppo suggests PJ owners set up a calibrated user profile to compensate. 'For an average user or customer with flatpanel display, we really do not recommend using this option at all,' is the brand's warning. And with good reason: activating it with *I Am Legend* out of curiosity resulted in a complete drop in brightness levels so that the image was painfully dark.

Further image adjustment parameters include brightness, contrast, hue, saturation, sharpness and noise >

reduction. Typically, BD deck owners will give these a steer, but if you've found the overall brightness levels of some HDR material too dark, the sliding tool could be useful.

With 1080p material, the Oppo's upscaling works exceptionally well. At the player's heart is a new MediaTek chipset that seems adept at adding pixel info while keeping processing noise in check. A Source Direct mode removes upscaling from the video chain, leaving it to your display. *Ghostbusters* (1080p BD) shines with accurate delineation, while even something as mundane as *Desperate Housewives* on DVD comes across well, with a healthy sense of stability and sharpness. However, don't expect it to work magic with set-top box TV channels fed through the deck's HDMI input. Comedy Central's endless showings of *Friends* still appeared shoddy.

Bug squashed

Web-watchers may be aware that Stacey Spears (US video processing expert and co-founder of Spears & Munsil) has unearthed a 'chroma bug' afflicting UHD BD playback in some hardware. In short, this results in a 0.5 pixel delay between chroma and luma information, which in layman's terms means a very slightly fuzzy image when viewed up close. Really close. Yet the UDP-203 passed test clips kindly provided by Spears & Munsil: the error is not an issue here.

'The Oppo's future Dolby Vision support is a feature that serious cinephiles may find hard to ignore'

In day-to-day operation, the Oppo is well behaved. The UI is uncluttered, layering simple menu options over pretty natural landscape picture backgrounds. Navigation is super zippy; sub menus are sensibly arranged. It's quiet enough in operation for its gentle hum to be masked by soundtrack noise, and disc loading is speedy. I did have one incident where chapter skipping (with Warner's *GoodFellas* UHD disc) caused the player to temporarily freeze, though.

Music performance is classy, too. Laced up via the deck's analogue output, Aerosmith's *Janie's Got a Gun* (Pump, CD) is all dramatic, dynamic slap-bass and synth stabs, with warm bass notes and driving delivery. In SACD land, Barb Jungr's low-key Dylan cover, *Sara* (Linn Records), is gently captivating, with wonderful reproduction of its close harmonies and piano instrumentation. But audiophiles take note: there's a step-up UDP-205 on the way...

SPECIFICATIONS

ULTRA HD: Yes **UPSCALING:** Yes. From SD and HD to 2,160p **MULTIREGION:** No. Region B BD/R2 DVD (Ultra HD discs are region-free) **HDMI:** 2 x outputs (1 x A/V, 1 x audio only); HDMI input **MULTICHANNEL ANALOGUE OUTPUT:** Yes. 7.1 **DIGITAL AUDIO OUTPUT:** optical and coaxial **ETHERNET:** Yes **BUILT IN WI-FI:** Yes **SACD/DVD-A:** Yes/Yes **DIMENSIONS:** 430(w) x 79(h) x 311(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 4.3kg

FEATURES: HDR to SDR downscaling; Strip Metadata function; 12-bit/10-bit/8-bit output; selectable resolution output; hi-res audio file support includes FLAC, ALAC and DSD; DLNA and USB file playback; image adjustment tools; Dolby Vision support promised by future firmware update

PARTNER WITH



CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON (UHD BD): Released in cinemas in 2000, this Sony Pictures back-catalogue martial arts title scrubs up very well on the 4K disc format, and features a newly-minted Dolby Atmos mix – see p105 for more.

There's a lot the UDP-203 can do that I'm not sure will ever get used by some buyers, such as its full bank of analogue outputs and preamp functionality, including crossover and speaker configuration, plus digital filter presets for the onboard DAC. Secondly, that HDMI input seems more redundant in a world of 4K-capable source devices. There's no doubting the performance of the player's own upscaling, but with Sky Q, Amazon Fire TV and games consoles now outputting at 4K, it's less of a draw. Home cinema owners will probably choose to route everything through their AVR, as usual.

This raises the issue of whether the UDP-203 is worth considering over Panasonic's more affordable DMP-UB900 if SACD and DVD-Audio are of no interest. I still reckon it is: Dolby Vision support, in light of recent announcements and screen developments, looks like being a feature serious cinephiles may find hard to ignore, and the performance, plus extensive adjustment options, of this Oppo are high-quality. And, personally, I don't miss Darbee at all ■

HCC VERDICT



Oppo UDP-203

→ £650 → www.oppodigital.co.uk

WE SAY: An impressive 4K debut. Dolby Vision support and flexible, extensive features are obvious highlights, as is the excellent build and usability. Image quality excels.



3. The player provides a 7.1 analogue output for legacy receivers

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Richard Stevenson finally auditions an AV receiver that can match his speaker array channel for channel

Denon turns it up to eleven





Denon's AVR-X6300H comes to the home cinema receiver market with a spec sheet hotter than Megan Fox in a stolen hot tub – but the headline news is its 11 channels of onboard amplification for a largescale Dolby Atmos, DTS:X or (optionally) Auro-3D experience. That means no more fiddling about with external power amps for 7.1.4 sound.

There's no mash-up of high- and low-power amp circuits here, either. Using Denon's monolithic amplifier construction, the X6300H packs 11 identical channels built onto a single large heat-sink. That should mean the same power, the same gain with volume, the same dynamic headroom and the same sonic balance across the entire soundstage.

More channels than ever before for Denon, then, but still not technically or financially the brand's top AVR. That accolade belongs to the £2,500 nine-channel AVR-X7200WA that joined Denon's comprehensive lineup nearly two years ago. A key difference is that the older flagship model boasts Denon's monoblock construction with separated left/right amplifier blocks, as opposed to the AVR-X6300H's one big power module.

This new model offers a whole host of technical upgrades that the X7200WA can't touch, though, including full HEOS multiroom music integration, a more refined setup assistant, and new Audyssey MultEQ XT32 platform. Built-in Wi-Fi now supports dual-band 2.4GHz and 5GHz connectivity, and the built-in upscaler converts anything to 4K resolution. That put a hilarious spin on original *Dad's Army* repeats over Christmas.

The eight-input, three-output HDMI stage was still left half-empty in my fairly complex system, so should be ample even when using some of the receiver's comprehensive three-zone multiroom features.

The X6300H is an ISF-certified AVR with ISF Day and ISF Night modes. As usual, those features are only accessible by an ISF technician, so getting the full calibration and setup is an optional extra.

The same is true of the complete Audyssey setup. Or it is at the moment. While the Denon's MultEQ XT32 implementation has a spectacularly good user interface and setup procedure, you still can't access the Audyssey Pro features... until later this Spring. Denon's Audyssey system for the X6300H will move over to an app-based setup and open the whole gamut of Audyssey Pro tools for those with the time and inclination.

While that is still an app download away, the current system packs in the usual niceties, plus Dynamic Volume, Dynamic EQ and Sub EQ, established via a supplied mic and Denon's funky cardboard tripod.

Speaking of apps, I'm impressed with how much Denon's AVR Remote app has been updated and improved since I last used it. Quick and intuitive, it includes a page that replicates the remote control's navigation keys and four main buttons. It could easily replace the standard remote in day-to-day use, which is just as well as the supplied physical item is rather mundane.

The app meshes well with HEOS multiroom too, something buyers of this amp can try straight away as it is currently being sold with a free HEOS 1 HS2 wireless speaker, typically worth £200.

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
11-channel AV receiver with Atmos and DTS:X decoding

POSITION:
Denon's newest models, one down from its flagship

PEERS:
Yamaha RX-A3060;
Anthem MRX 1120;
Onkyo TX-RZ3100

1. The AVR shares the styling of Denon's nine-channel X4300H

2. There's a Denon Remote App available in addition to this full-size handset





3

Getting back to the main plot and those 11 channels. The claimed power, if you read the marketing hype quickly, is 11 x 205W. In reality, that's one channel driving a 1kHz test tone into a low-load with 1 per cent distortion managing 205W. Into 8 ohm stereo speakers with a full-bandwidth 20Hz-20kHz signal and a more respectable 0.05 per cent distortion, Denon's figure drops down to 140W. With all channels driven, the maximum power per channel will be somewhat less again.

Microphone, stand, a well-constructed setup assistant and a minimum of three measured mic positions makes very light work of what is Audyssey's most comprehensive setup and EQ suite yet. The software features Low Frequency Containment and EQ for dual subwoofers, and works superbly well. Post setup options include Reference (with a small X-curve), Flat, Front (to bypass EQ on the main stereo speakers), and LFC level. Further tweaking, such as filter by filter adjustments, will have to wait for the new Audyssey app.

Set to stun

Star Trek Beyond might not have the massive sub-sonic LF pulses of the eponymous 11th film in the franchise but it packs in a massive-scale native Dolby Atmos mix that will test any system. The Denon does not disappoint. With the volume control set to stun, the lengthy attack sequence on the Enterprise is an 11-channel festival of sound backed by viscerally tight and well-focused bass effects. Dialogue balances nicely in the mix without overt *Expendables*-level boosting and the Sub EQ does wonders for keeping room-nodes from punching out your windows.

Yet with all channels blazing it seems to me there's not quite the individual separation of effects or sheer gung-ho

scale of some of Denon's previous big-hitting AVRs. In quieter scenes there is a classy refinement to the sound, though, with crisp, intelligible dialogue and enveloping, believable atmospherics. Object-based effects sparkle with pin-point positioning and the size of the soundfield scales linearly with volume – up to a point.

As the Enterprise crashes into the planet (not a spoiler, as that always happens in a *Star Trek* film) the Denon delivers all-channel sonic maelstrom at high volume with aplomb. Yet it doesn't quite capture the massive impact of the huge ship and planet coming together through the size of the soundstage. It feels a little constrained by the dimensions of the listening room, rather than delivering the illusion of the speakers being beyond walls, and it's not quite as rich as previous Denon monster AVRs.

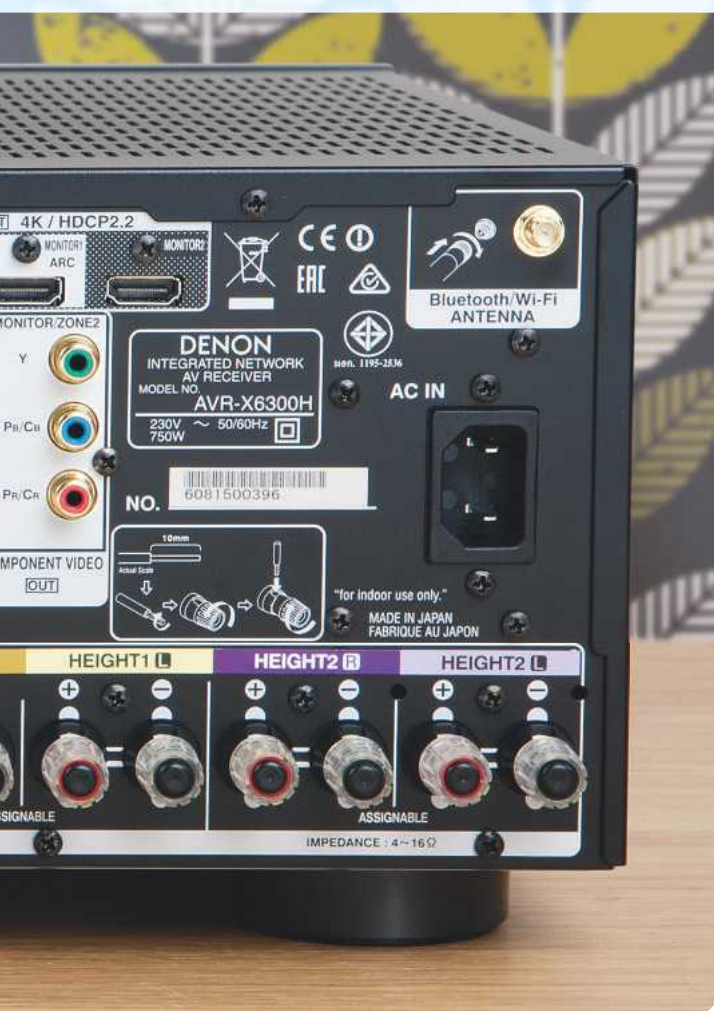
I wonder if this slightly less full-bodied sound is a result of the power constraints of feeding 11 amplifiers, or actually a tuning differentiation between the new X6300H and the flagship AVR-7200WA? Certainly, I can see those wanting all the bells and whistles opting for this model, and those pursuing ultimate cinema sound going with the 7200WA and adding separate amplification for overhead speakers. Coincidence or design, it justifies both models existing in Denon's range, for sure.

Running through the Audyssey EQ curves I settled on the Front setting as it brought the familiar character of my front speakers into play on most material. The Flat option was good if a little laid-back, and the Reference setting had by far the most cinematic balance of the lot. This worked well breathing life into older native Dolby Digital/DTS movies in particular, and a romp through the DVD collection ensued.

I'd forgotten the visual and sonic feast of *House of Flying Daggers* and the AVR-X6300H brought a thoroughly

4





modern upgrade to this elegantly-styled 2004 Chinese martial arts classic, particularly when opting to add 11-channel DTS Neural:X processing to the native DTS 5.1 mix. While rear-back channels are brought into play with gusto, the overheads are given a far subtler and more articulate role. During the dance sequence in the Peony Pavilion, my ceiling speakers deliver gentle sounds of the background water pools and whispers from the high gallery around the stage. It is a sublime effect considering all this information is otherwise embedded in the native DTS soundtrack. It adds a gloriously three-dimensional presence to the piece.

For those worried that all this add-on multichannel processing could be a bit artificial, fear not. The Denon upgrades native 5.1 with startling precision, perhaps creating a more natural and integrated soundfield



SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY ATMOS: Yes **DTS:X:** Yes **THX:** No **MULTICHANNEL INPUT:** No. **MULTICHANNEL PRE-OUT:** Yes. 11.2-channel phono outputs **MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED):** 11 x 205W (into 8 ohms, single channel measurement) **MULTIROOM:** Yes. Three zones, plus HEOS **AV INPUTS:** 4 x digital audio inputs (2 x coaxial, 2 x optical) **HDMI:** Yes. 8 x inputs; 3 x outputs **COMPONENT VIDEO:** Yes. 2 x inputs; 1 x output **VIDEO UPSCALING:** Yes. To 4K/60 **DIMENSIONS:** 434(w) x 393(d) x 167(h)mm **WEIGHT:** 15.5kg

FEATURES: Audyssey MultEQ XT32 Platinum; AL24 processing; Tunes 'net radio; Spotify; AirPlay; ISF calibration; dual-band Wi-Fi; Bluetooth; RS232 control; advanced GUI with setup assistant; Eco modes; Auro-3D via optional upgrade; DenonLink HD; Pure Direct mode; Denon AVR Remote and HEOS apps

PARTNER WITH



KEF C1200RR-THX: While KEF's R50s are an option for upfiring Atmos speakers, these UniQ driver models are designed to fit in-ceiling as a complement to premium setups. They're priced £475 each and claim a low-end down to below 40Hz.

than some actual 11-channel mixes can manage. I can't think why you would not engage 11-channel Neural:X or Dolby Surround irrespective of the native mix – it really is that good.

For music fans this receiver ticks all the boxes with a host of standard and high-res music services onboard, available through the excellent HEOS app. Using Tidal via HEOS is arguably slicker than Tidal's own app, and all your saved playlists and content are available at the touch of a screen button. The Denon's upfront and articulate balance shines through stereo music, delivering detail and clarity in buckets if not backed up with much in the way of warmth.

Nils Lofgren's guitar through *Keith Don't Go from Acoustic Live* (via Tidal Hi-Fi) has impressive attack and an edgy sound that all but paints a picture of the instrument's steel strings. Yet in the Denon's standard music mode that balance is likely to prove an uncomfortable bedfellow for forward-sounding speakers. Thankfully the Direct and particularly Pure Direct modes work wonders, cleaning up the top end and bringing greater body and smoothness to stereo sound.

Slotting in nicely

A technical *tour de force*, brilliantly intuitive to use and bringing sparkling 11-channel surround sound to pretty much any movie, Denon's AVR-X6300H is proof of the Atmos/DTS:X pudding even without native 11-channel ingredients. Its crisp, layered sound is a great sonic upgrade for Dolby Digital DVDs upwards. The balance could be warmer and the soundstage larger but there is always Denon's AVR-7200WA and some add-on power amps for that. And from what's actually on offer here, this is decent value ■

HCC VERDICT



Denon AVR-X6300H

→ £2,000 → www.denon.co.uk

WE SAY: Denon's 11-channel AVR caters for Atmos and DTS:X setups while offering must-have features and fabulous control apps. Sprightly articulate sound, if lacking a little muscle.

3. Denon arranges speaker terminals in a long line, and colour codes them, too

4. A front-flap hides setup mic, USB and HDMI inputs, plus control buttons

John Archer meets Epson's most affordable UHD and HDR-capable home cinema projector

Cut-price but cutting edge?



Somehow, Epson's new EH-TW7300 only costs £2,200. That's despite it being one of only a handful of projectors capable of playing both 4K and high dynamic range sources. Surely such a ground-breaking deal has to be too good to be true?

From the outside there's no obvious sign that the TW7300 is hiding some sort of big, nasty compromise. It sports the same enormous bodywork we saw wrapped around the higher-spec TW9300 last year [HCC #266], and at first glance it seems to offer the same connections – including two HDCP 2.2-enabled HDMI, a 12V trigger port, and an RS-232C jack.

Further investigation, though, reveals that unlike the TW9300, there's no version of this model that supports wireless HD video transmission.

More important ways this PJ's specifications fall short of those of its higher-end sibling are its 2,300 Lumens of maximum light output (compared to 2,500), and its claimed dynamic contrast ratio of 160,000:1, versus an eye-popping 1,000,000:1.

These spec differences would look substantial even if we were only talking about a standard dynamic range projector. With HDR they could add up to a night-and-day performance difference. We'll see, but first some details...

The TW7300 supports active shutter 3D, while its 4K capabilities are delivered in a 'pseudo' fashion similar to that used by JVC's e-Shift projectors. Essentially two sets of 1080p chipsets are placed in sequence but offset diagonally by half a pixel, resulting in double the amount of physical pixels in the finished image.

This does not enable the projector to deliver a true 4K image; the projector still has to downscale 4K to HD to run through the 1080p chips. But it can certainly create an image that looks more dense, clean (provided the projector's image processing is good enough) and free of jaggies than anything you'd get from a Full HD model.

The TW7300 supports an extensive suite of picture adjustments, including a powerful processing system containing noise reduction, frame interpolation, resolution boosting and dynamic contrast components. You can also instantly turn the majority of the processing off via a 'Fast' processing mode. This reduces the time the projector takes to render images to around 32ms on average, making the TW7300 a good bigscreen video gaming display.

Impressively, considering its mid-range nature, the TW7300 deploys a motorised optical zoom and vertical/horizontal image shifting system that aids initial setup, and enables Epson to offer lens memories, where you can establish different image settings for different content aspect ratios.

Magnificent scaling

With standard dynamic range the TW7300 is remarkably good for its money. Running the Ultra HD Blu-ray of *The Magnificent Seven* without HDR enabled reveals an image of impressive clarity and detail. The various extreme close-ups during Chisolm's first bar-room shootout aren't quite as textured and precise as they are on the genuine >

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
4K-enhanced LCD projector with HDR playback

POSITION:
In the upper tier of Epson's PJ range, yet below TW8300 and TW9300 models

PEERS:
Epson EH-TW9300;
Sony VPL-HW65ES;
BenQ W3000

1. The EH-TW7300 is Epson's most affordable '4K Enhancement' PJ

2. The remote offers direct keys for options including colour mode and lens memory



2



3

Full UHD Sony VW550ES elsewhere in this issue (p54), but they certainly look more than 'just HD'.

Colours also appear bold during *Magnificent Seven*'s climactic sun and blood-drenched final sequences, but they're detailed and natural, propelled by an impressive combination of brightness and black level response.

You have to tweak a little to get the TW7300's contrast working to its best advantage; I'd recommend setting the lamp output to low and the dynamic contrast to medium for the best results in a dark room. This is no great hardship, though, and it's nice that the TW7300 has sufficient setup flexibility to deliver a surprisingly watchable picture even if there's a little additional light in the room.

Motion remains clean and stable even when all the *Magnificent Seven*'s horses are charging across the screen, and noise is at a premium, proving the quality of Epson's '4K Enhanced' processing.

The TW7300 continues to impress with a normal HD Blu-ray of *Goosebumps*. The same scaling engine that does such a clever job of giving a pseudo 4K effect with 4K sources makes the sequence with the werewolf in the supermarket look more textured, natural and 'filmic' than it does on normal HD projectors. Even colour blends enjoy an uptick in subtlety rather than just being left looking plasticky as they would with lesser scaling engines.

Moving into the third dimension with old favourite *Tangled*, the TW7300 takes its first significant stumble. Initially all seems well, as *Tangled*'s animated environments look unusually bright, colourful and well proportioned for such an affordable projector. Unfortunately, though, large-scale shots like the early dance in the market and the later floating lantern love song sequence exhibit quite high levels of crosstalk ghosting around objects in the mid and far distance.

Aiming high, but...

You might be wondering at this point why I've yet to mention the TW7300's HDR performance. The answer, sadly, is that I've been saving the worst until last.

The problem is that the Epson doesn't have enough brightness or contrast to dovetail with HDR's extreme luminance range and colour volumes. In fact, it just can't make HDR as watchable as SDR.

There are four main problems with the TW7300's HDR presentation. First, the darkness of the big fight

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active shutter **4K:** No. 'Enhanced' from double 1080p chipset system, but will accept a 4K signal **HDR:** Yes. HDR 10 **CONNECTIONS:** 2 x HDMI inputs; RS-232; 12V trigger port **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** 2,300 Lumens **CONTRAST (CLAIMED):** 160,000:1 **ZOOM:** x2.1 **DIMENSIONS:** 520(w) x 170(h) x 450(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 11kg

FEATURES: LCD projector, 4K Enhancement technology; 24dB claimed running noise in Normal lamp mode; 5,000-hour claimed lamp life in economy mode; motorised lens adjustments; AMX, Crestron, Control4 support; DCI colour filter in Cinema mode; 'Fast' processing mode for gaming; 1.35-2.84:1 throw ratio; 10-position lens memory; frame interpolation; Super Resolution; vertical lens shift (+/- 96.3%); horizontal lens shift (47.1 %); USB input for Wireless LAN adapter (optional)

PARTNER WITH



EPSON ELPMB30: This low-profile ceiling mount from Epson sells for around £110, and offers three-way adjustment for image alignment. The unit is black, but comes with a white cover to allow it to blend in with your ceiling.

between Batman and Superman in – yes – *Batman v Superman* looks too cloying in HDR thanks to the way shadow detail is crushed out of the darkest areas. Second, dark objects can begin to silhouette if they're battling against lighter backdrops.

Third, the picture looks duller overall than it does if you watch the same scenes in standard dynamic range, as the projector lowers the image's brightness floor in a bid to deliver an increased sense of dynamism.

Finally, if you try to push the brightness up to levels that look more, well, HDR, such as by using the Dynamic picture preset, significant amounts of detail gets clipped out of the picture's brightest areas. Explosive effects in *Batman v Superman* appear bleached and empty.

The one real plus note in the TW7300's HDR pictures is the way it renders a strikingly wide colour palette if you engage the Cinema preset, which introduces an extra physical colour filter into the optical array. Unfortunately, though, this colour filter makes HDR content look even darker.

The bottom line is that while I sincerely admire Epson's determination to make HDR enjoyable on a mid-range model, the results are so compromised on the TW7300 that I'd suggest you just stick with SDR. Or if you really want HDR, try to find the extra money needed to buy the somewhat more satisfying TW9300.

It hardly seems fair, though, to finish this review on such a downer. While it may not fly with HDR, that's perhaps only to be expected for the money. Far less expected is how efficient the TW7300 is when it comes to regular (albeit 2D) Blu-rays, with the impressive 4K enhancement technology proving worthy of its inclusion. As a successor to Epson's long-running EH-TW7200, this is a meaningful upgrade ■

3. A slide-door hides the Epson's on-body controls

HCC VERDICT



Epson EH-TW7300

→ £2,200 → www.epson.co.uk

WE SAY: Stick with standard dynamic range material and this Epson is good enough to represent a solid bargain. But the HDR performance is a disappointment.

says the homeowner of this 4K home cinema with Dolby Atmos 7.2.4



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Get back to base

With its even-handed sound and blissfully easy day-to-day operation, Cambridge Audio's new top-line soundbase is a fine addition to the category, says **Mark Craven**

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO COULD have gone back to the drawing board for its latest soundbase speaker, but has instead opted to take its previous TV5 model and refresh its audio chops and connective options while retaining the muted styling and driver technology. It's retained the naming system too, so be aware that this is known as the TV5 (v2), and the more affordable new TV2 is the TV2 (v2).

Physically, the soundbase is from the chunky end of the spectrum, measuring 10cm high. At a little over 72cm wide, it's a perfect fit for 50in TVs. Owners of larger displays should check their screen's stand characteristics before investing, or make room to rack the 'base nearby. Cambridge Audio suggests the top-panel is strong enough for 30kg loads.

The unit features sturdy-feeling MDF bodywork and a deep, black-cloth front speaker grille. This can be prized off to reveal the TV5 (v2)'s two front-facing 2.25in BMR (Balanced Mode Radiator) drivers, arranged at either end of the front panel in a typical stereo config. It's under here where you'll also find the necessary button to perform the TV's IR remote learning function, for volume control from your display's own handset.

Joining these drivers are dual 6.5in down-firing woofers on the soundbase's belly – four stubby feet keep the cabinet off your furniture and give the drivers space to breathe. These are allied to rear-firing bass ports.

Sonic secret

Cambridge Audio doesn't quote a power figure for the TV5 (v2)'s onboard digital amplification. However, the brand does report that grunt has been increased over the previous version (rated at 100W), and the signal path redesigned to upgrade sound quality.

Other refinements offered by this new model include an individual sealed chamber for the BMR drivers, and revised DSP engine. Ones that are actually obvious from the outside are the absence of a 'power brick' (the power supply is now integrated into the unit) and an HDMI terminal amongst its rear-panel connections.

The inclusion of HDMI is good news, although the implementation here is kind of unusual. The single port is an ARC-enabled HDMI output, not tied to an HDMI input of any kind. So external sources (Blu-ray players, games consoles, etc) will still need to be either hooked up via the TV5 (v2)'s optical input, or through a TV.

The ARC output does, however, enable an HDMI connection to a display, and hi-res playback of TV-delivered material up to 192kHz/24-bit.

As with its predecessor, the soundbase supports Bluetooth streaming (aptX) and, says Cambridge Audio, can remember up to eight different paired Bluetooth devices for automatic connection. This is something I didn't test as it turns out I don't own that many Bluetooth sources. Useful for the Waltons, though.

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Second-gen
soundbase speaker

POSITION:
Cambridge Audio's
top-of-the-range
model

PEERS:
Canton DM75;
Philips Fidelio XS1;
Sony HT-XT1



A final alteration over the first TV5 concerns the bundled remote control. As before this is a full-sized offering, but the button layout has been rearranged in pursuit of slicker ease of use. In truth, the limited options offered (input, volume, sub level, EQ mode) means a credit card-style zapper would have sufficed, but this feels good in the hand and is less likely to go missing.

Weighty sound

If the TV5 looks no-nonsense and ready for business, the same can be said of its audio performance. It delivers a happily high-power, dynamic and weighty sound that is easily commensurate with the £300 asking price.

Those BMR drivers (which function both as mid-range and tweeter) are chosen for their balanced frequency response and wide-dispersion characteristics. The latter is an obvious trait of the soundbase, as its soundfield is free

'The TV5's mid-range is full and bold – dialogue, vocals and musical scores are obvious beneficiaries'

of an obvious sweet spot and good for off-axis viewers. The benefits of having no mid/HF crossover are perhaps less of an issue on a reasonably-priced telly add-on.

The TV5 (v2) loves big, loud movie moments, and its dual bass driver complement is key here. The sense of scale that only comes from a strong low-end is present in *Fast & Furious 5*'s bank vault robbery sequence. As Dom and Brian tear through the streets of Rio de Janeiro, the hulking metal box in tow smashes through concrete bollards and collides with cars with enjoyable impact. LF is tight and sudden, and puts you in the heart of the action. Similarly, when Owen demonstrates his laser-light helmet in *Popstar...* (p98), the accompanying extra-terrestrial

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 2.25in BMR drivers; 2 x 6.5in down-firing bass drivers **ONBOARD POWER (CLAIMED):** N/A **CONNECTIONS:** HDMI ARC output; optical digital audio input; 3.5mm analogue input; analogue phono input **DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD MA:** No/No **SEPARATE SUB:** No. **REMOTE CONTROL:** Yes **DIMENSIONS:** 725(w) x 100(h) x 340(d)mm **WEIGHT:** N/A

FEATURES: aptX Bluetooth with up to eight paired device memory (automatic connection); BMR driver technology; hi-res (192kHz/24-bit) via HDMI; four sound preset modes (Voice, Film, TV and Music); bass level adjustment; automatic power-down (20 minutes)

PARTNER WITH



CAMBRIDGE AUDIO YOYO: Add a slice of CA's sonics to other rooms in your house with a Bluetooth speaker from its recent Yoyo range. Pricing starts at £150 for the Yoyo S; a stereo M model is also available, and the large L is coming soon.

sound effect positively bursts from the lower mid-range with alarming dynamism.

The lack of dedicated tweeters is perhaps responsible for a smoothed-off top-end delivery, which is easy on the ear. HF effects don't spit or sparkle uncomfortably; there's a fluid feeling to its handling of finer soundtrack details. Cracking glass during the *F&F* bank sequence is nicely forward in the mix. Some may prefer the delivery to be a bit more aggressive, but I like the sense of cohesion.

There's no way of altering the speaker's treble output. Adjustments offered are Film, TV, Voice and Music EQ modes. As with the previous TV5, subjectively these aren't massively different, although, oddly, I found Film to be less impactful than the TV and Music options. Whatever mode you choose, you have the option of boosting or diminishing bass response. I kept it up high.

The TV5 (v2)'s mid-range is full and bold – dialogue, vocals and musical scores are obvious beneficiaries – and it meshes well with the rest of the frequency range, particularly the meaty low-end. This soundbase sounds well-balanced at all times.

A criticism is that its volume control jumps up and down in quite severe steps, which can sometimes make it hard to find the right setting for the material you're watching. And, as said, the soundbase's preset modes would be better joined by a more varied EQ. More of an issue, perhaps, is that single HDMI – it feels like a halfway house when switching capability would have been better.

And then there's the fact that times have moved on a bit since the first TV5. On-trend buyers may expect more than just Bluetooth streaming from a home entertainment product. App control and Wi-Fi streaming (plus Atmos!) are avenues for Cambridge Audio to explore next time around. But none of this detracts from the sound quality and ease-of-use on offer ■

1. Behind the grille sit two BMR drivers and the learning remote control key

HCC VERDICT



Cambridge Audio TV5 (v2)

→ £300 → www.cambridgeaudio.com

WE SAY: A solid, energetic and confident stereo performance from an unassuming TV booster. Not the last word in attacking delivery, and an HDMI input would have been nice.

AV INFO

PRODUCT:

Native 4K projector also capable of playing HDR

POSITION:

Sony's top consumer HDR PJ

PEERS:

JVC DLA-X7000;
Sony VW320ES;
Epson EH-LS10500

1. The PJ comes with Sony's typical handset

2. Sony rates brightness output at 1,800 Lumens

John Archer adjusts the images of Sony's HDR PJ to suit his demanding tastes...

The price of HDR success

Amazingly, at the time of writing, Sony remains the only brand selling genuine 4K projectors. JVC's eye-wateringly expensive native 4K Z1 is due to arrive in limited numbers soon, and Epson and JVC both have pseudo 4K projectors employing pixel-shifting technology. For now, though, Sony is the only brand home cinema fans can turn to if they want the whole 4K projection enchilada.

The VW550ES is Sony's latest 4K model, and its £9,000 price tag immediately reminds us that native 4K projection doesn't yet come cheap. In fact, the projector hits the market with a ticket higher than its well-received VW520ES predecessor.

Before you start questioning whether a 4K pixel count is enough to justify spending thousands of pounds more than you'd need for a high-quality Full HD projector, the VW550ES has another trick up its sleeve: high dynamic range (HDR) support.

It's not the only HDR-capable model around – relatively cheap projectors like the £4,000 JVC DLA-X5000 and even the £2,200 Epson EH-TW7300 reviewed on p48 in this issue claim to play HDR, too.

However, this Sony takes its HDR duties particularly seriously thanks to its (unique in the projector world) support for the new broadcast-friendly HLG HDR format, and a new HDR Contrast adjustment tool.

Sony claims that this latter option has been introduced in response to feedback regarding the VW520ES, and essentially it allows the user to sacrifice some dynamic range when watching HDR content in return for raising the image's overall brightness floor.

The choice is yours

Some die-hard AV fans may take umbrage at Sony letting people muck about so easily with the way HDR material looks. For me, though, it's just common sense. The thing is, no remotely affordable projector – by which I mean models that cost under £30,000 – can currently get bright enough to show pure, unadulterated HDR

convincingly. Instead, such projectors have ended up presenting you with images that can look disappointingly dull, lacking in detail in both the brightest and darkest areas, and too biased towards black colours. Sony's decision to let you raise the foundation light level of HDR gives you at least the chance to solve some of these problems.

It has to be said that the VW550ES's claimed maximum brightness of 1,800 Lumens doesn't look on paper to be particularly HDR friendly. Epson's much cheaper TW7300 boasts 2,300 Lumens by comparison. However, Sony claims a 20 per cent improvement in dynamic contrast over its earlier HDR model, aiming for a sense of expanded contrast with HDR content even if the projector can't hit the sort of peak brightness you might expect.

Other key features of the projector are Sony's Reality Creation processing; 3D playback; an input lag reduction setting that brings the time the projector takes to render images down to below 30ms; and a fully-motorised lens system that provides enough optical zoom and image shift to adapt to almost any room.

The unit looks practically identical to previous Sony 4K projectors, much to the annoyance of the HCC photographer. It's big, features a squat shape with curved upper edges, and carries a large lens at the centre of its front edge highlighted by a fringe of metallic gold stripes. It's kinda pretty.

At first glance the connections seem much the same as those of its predecessor. There are two HDMI's, Ethernet and USB ports for service updates, plus RS-232C, IR port and 12V trigger outputs to aid integration into a wider home control system. It turns out, though, that the VW550ES's HDMI's improve on those of the VW520ES by supporting >







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10-bit 4K images at 60 rather than just 30 frames-per-second – a tweak that should prove handy now that HLG HDR broadcasts are getting close that will likely use frame rates higher than 30fps.

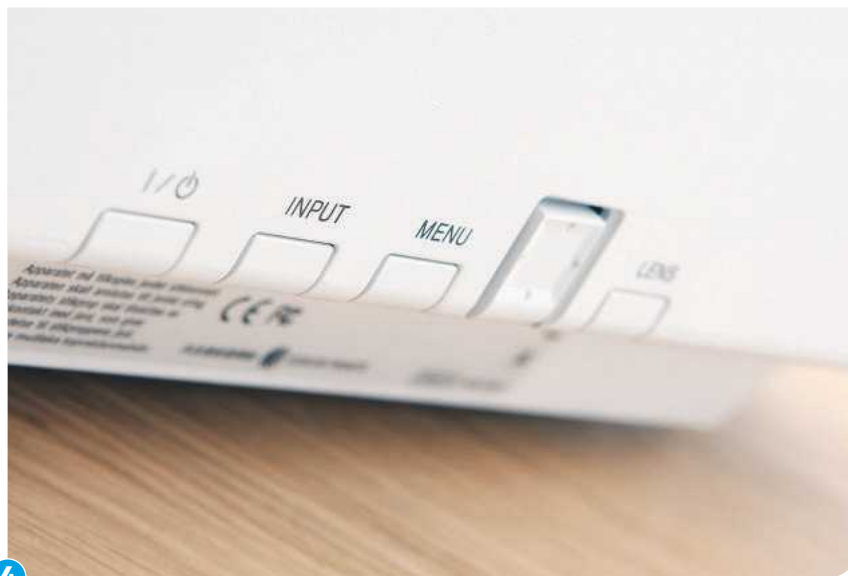
Time for Tim

I began my auditions with Tim Burton's *Miss Peregrine's Home For Peculiar Children* on Ultra HD Blu-ray, and immediately found the projector's new HDR Contrast feature a useful tool. Stick with the most accurate HDR picture settings and you're left with an image that looks relatively dull and muted, even during scenes such as those in a sun-lit garden, which I've seen look explosively bright and drenched in expanded colour on HDR TVs.

Dark scenes such as those in the 'time portal' cave also suffer with noticeable silhouetting, where dark objects lack shadow detail versus the lighter material around them. And while colours look richer than they do in SDR, they lack the sort of volume they'd enjoy if the image's base brightness level was higher.

Turning to the HDR Contrast feature to improve the situation pays dividends. Pushing it up beyond its 70 setting results in a much more satisfying image containing more all-round brightness, better detailing in dark areas, and a more natural feel to the UHD Blu-ray's expanded colour spectrum. The interior footage from *Miss Peregrine's* home now looks much more lush and vibrant than it does if you stick to the supposedly neutral presentation.

It is true that with the HDR Contrast setting increased you aren't seeing such an extreme luminance range between dark and bright. But the adjusted HDR image actually feels like less of a compromise than the 'native' one, confirming that Sony is being smart in allowing you to adapt content to the capabilities of its projector,



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rather than trying to force the projector to doggedly track demanding HDR requirements that it's really not equipped for.

Certainly I'd far rather watch the HDR Contrast-adjusted images of the VW550ES to any 'native' HDR images on either JVC's DLA-X5000 or Epson's EH-TW7300 – even though the Sony projector isn't actually as bright as the Epson.

Native 4K attraction

The VW550ES is the first time with a projector where I've not ended up turning off HDR on my Panasonic DMP-UB900 Ultra HD Blu-ray player so that I could enjoy the resolution of Ultra HD Blu-rays without having to



worry about HDR. That's not to say, though, that the VW550ES isn't still brilliant with standard dynamic range footage. Native 4K SDR looks imperiously detailed and clean, clearly outperforming the resolution performance of the up-rezzed 4K efforts of both JVC and Epson, despite those 4K systems actually being very impressive at what they do. There are details in clothing and faces – including Eva Green's disturbingly huge eyes – in *Miss Peregrine's Home For Peculiar Children* that you don't get from the pseudo 4K machines. Or any Full HD projector, of course.

And there's a gorgeous extra directness to the Sony's presentation, thanks to its native 4K pixel mapping suffering with none of the noise that accompanies rival models.

While a strong and fast-growing pot of 4K content with which to feed this projector means buyers won't be short of high-end thrills, there's also much more 1080p material around. It's therefore a relief (although an expected one) to find Sony's movie maestro almost supernaturally good at upscaling HD Blu-rays and TV shows.

With the Blu-ray of *The BFG*, for instance, the VW550ES delivers details in the picture – especially during scenes inside the BFG's cluttered abode – that go missing in the HD source. And the colours of Buckingham Palace's gardens and interiors contain more subtle blends and tonal shifts thanks to the accuracy with which the projector calculates the extra pixels needed.

Processing noise or motion lag associated with these upscaling enhancements are minimal. The image holds up well to close scrutiny on my 90in reference projection screen.

A further performance feature of the VW550ES is its active 3D playback. *Miss Peregrine's Home For Peculiar Children* has some stand-out, aggressively rendered 3D moments – particularly one sequence where a bomb is about to explode – and Sony's projector handles them well, displaying a stable, believable image. The excellent contrast performance works to create an expansive sense of 3D space and depth, while pictures are remarkably bright despite the need to don Sony's active shutter glasses. Detail levels are exceptionally high, motion is handled

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active shutter **4K:** Yes. 4,096 x 2,160 **HDR:** Yes. HDR 10/HLG **CONNECTIONS:** 2 x HDMI inputs; IR jack; RS-232C; 2 x 12V trigger outputs; Ethernet and USB service ports **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** 1,800 Lumens **CONTRAST (CLAIMED):** 350,000:1 **ZOOM:** x2.06 **DIMENSIONS:** 495.6(w) x 195.3(h) x 463.6(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 14kg

FEATURES: SXRD projector system; Sony Reality Creation processing; low input lag gaming mode; 26dB claimed running noise; 6,000-hour claimed lamp life in low lamp output mode; HDR Contrast tool; powered zoom, focus and lens shift (+85%/-80% vertical; +/-31% horizontal); HDCP 2.2 on both HDMI inputs; 4K at 60p (4:2:0 10-bit/12-bit)

PARTNER WITH



MISS PEREGRINE'S HOME FOR PECULIAR CHILDREN (UHD BD):

The 4K release of this stunning-looking fantasy flick hits UK stores on Feb 6 (we tested the Sony PJ with the region-free US import). UHD BD buyers also get a Dolby Atmos soundmix.

cleanly, and there's hardly any 3D crosstalk ghosting noise. It's an impressive 3D experience.

With its extreme contrast, gorgeous colour performance and low input lag also making the VW550ES a fun gaming display with both HD and 4K consoles, there's really nothing it can't make look awesome.

A minor sting in the tail

But is it perfect? Has Sony hit a home cinema home run? Not quite. Once concern, inevitably, is its HDR performance. As well as only making HDR look good when you compromise its dynamic range – and still sometimes leaving relatively dark objects looking hollow when they appear against bright backdrops – the projector doesn't automatically switch into its high lamp output mode when it detects HDR. This is odd as watching HDR in any less powerful lamp mode is borderline pointless.

The VW550ES runs markedly more noisily in high lamp mode too, meaning you'll need to try and situate it as far away as possible from your seating position if you're expecting to watch a lot of HDR movies, or you're running the projector brightly enough to counter ambient light.

These issues are annoyances rather than anything remotely close to deal breakers. They do little to prevent the VW550ES from making its £9,000 price tag look reasonable.

But a final word of caution regards the picture size you're after. If you can live with a 'mere' 75in or 78in 4K HDR image, then you could save yourself a few thousand quid and get a more full-blooded HDR experience by buying one of Sony's ZD9 or Samsung's KS9500 models instead. If anything less than 90 inches just won't cut it, though, then the VW550ES is as good as it gets for under £10,000 ■

3. Both of the Sony's HDMI inputs are HDCP 2.2-enabled

4. Side-mounted controls cover input selection and menu navigation

5. The projector offers motorised 2.06x zoom control

HCC VERDICT



Sony VPL-VW550ES

→ £9,000 → www.sony.co.uk/pro

WE SAY: If you can afford it and a 75in or 78in TV simply isn't big enough, then Sony's VW550ES is worthy of your consideration, and capable of big, beautiful 4K images.



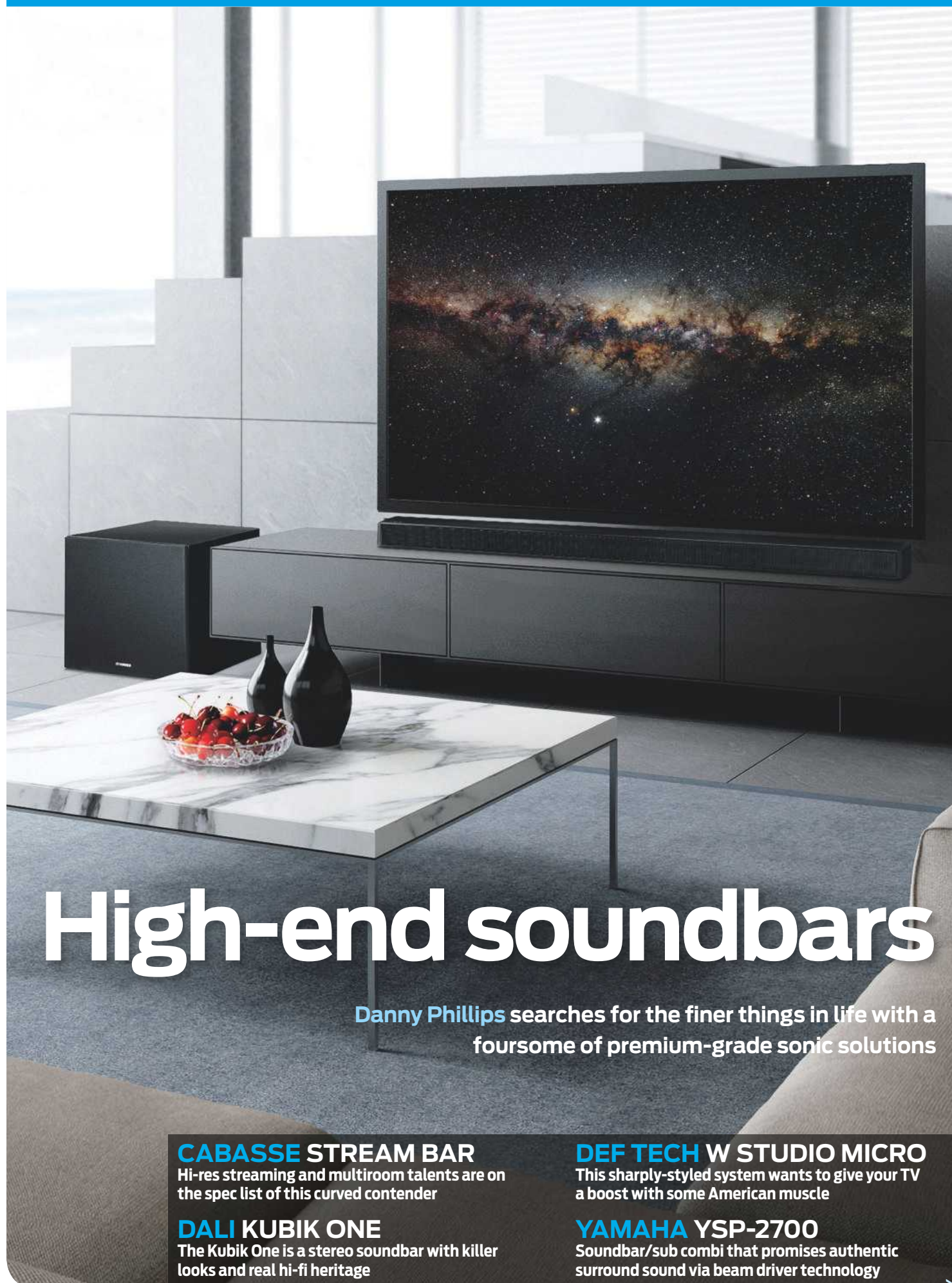
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High-end soundbars

Danny Phillips searches for the finer things in life with a foursome of premium-grade sonic solutions

CABASSE STREAM BAR

Hi-res streaming and multiroom talents are on the spec list of this curved contender

DALI KUBIK ONE

The Kubik One is a stereo soundbar with killer looks and real hi-fi heritage

DEF TECH W STUDIO MICRO

This sharply-styled system wants to give your TV a boost with some American muscle

YAMAHA YSP-2700

Soundbar/sub combi that promises authentic surround sound via beam driver technology

Cabasse Stream BAR

The French marque hopes to raise the 'bar with this finessed, hi-fi-friendly system



FRENCH BRAND CABASSE brings its audiophile ethos to the soundbar market with the Stream BAR, a TV speaker upgrade that doubles as a Wi-Fi/Bluetooth music streamer.

To that end, the driver array has a distinct hi-fi leaning, with two custom-designed tweeters and four mid/bass drivers, powered by 80W of three-way amplification. A wireless subwoofer mucks in with 100W of bass muscle.

Quirky and flamboyant, the Stream BAR is a visual stunner by usual soundbar standards – the cylindrical enclosure is shrouded in black fabric and embellished by silver trims and subtle branding. A hidden LED panel and touch-sensitive controls occupy the centre. Build quality easily meets expectations for the money.

A low-profile design keeps screen intrusion to a minimum, but at over a metre wide it's designed to accompany larger TVs, not mid-sized bedroom sets.

The subwoofer is surprisingly glamorous, with a glossy top panel and curved corners that pack plenty of living room appeal. Wireless connectivity lets you place it where you want and it pairs automatically with its soundbar partner.

Rear socketry includes an HDMI input and ARC output, but the v1.4 spec means UHD Blu-ray passthrough is off the menu.

Should you expect more HDMI's for the money? Perhaps. But given that most people will hook up a TV via optical or ARC it's not a deal breaker. Ethernet, 3.5mm analogue input

and USB complete the lineup, the latter allowing you to play hi-res music files.

Stream on

Multiroom streaming (the 'bar can link to other Stream products) is a key feature. Cabasse's Stream Control app lets you access Deezer, Qobuz, Spotify, Tidal and internet radio, as well as NAS drives and networked PCs.

It's a neat piece of software in terms of layout, reliability and speed. It also beats using the physical remote, which is a little fiddly and unresponsive.

The Stream BAR's wide dimensions and multi-driver array result in a sound that could be mistaken for that of a larger system. It has no trouble filling my high-ceilinged living room with a towering, expansive soundstage, pushing effects beyond the physical dimensions of the unit.

The sub lends impressive heft to the sound. It rumbles with authority during big action moments, but shows subtlety and agility when needed. During *Spectre*'s dramatic opening in Mexico City, the collapsing walls shook my chest and I felt the depth of the helicopter's blades as it swooped over the crowd.

The thumping staccato soundtrack and chanting crowd noises are delivered with aplomb, heightening the excitement. Gunshots are loud and incisive and the iconic Bond theme cuts through in grand style.

There's a perfect fusion between soundbar and subwoofer, with an imperceptible crossover. The soundbar's 180Hz bass

response is fairly limited – something that becomes apparent when you turn off the subwoofer – but in tandem I simply didn't notice any gap between the two.

The sound is inviting and full-bodied, with little traces of hardness when the volume is raised. It's a smooth, finessed listen (more so than some of its rivals here), bringing exquisite top-end detail to a powerful soundstage. These nuances build atmosphere brilliantly and bring real-world tangibility to effects.

Flipping between Surround and Hi-Fi modes finds the former widening the soundfield in a natural way, although there's no actual surround presence. Hi-Fi works well with music, offering sumptuous stereo sound with tons of detail and a rich, open character.

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x tweeters; 6 x mid/bass drivers **AMPLIFICATION (CLAIMED):** Soundbar: 80W; subwoofer: 100W **CONNECTIONS:** HDMI v1.4 input; HDMI output (ARC); optical digital input; 3.5mm minijack input; USB port; Ethernet **DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD MA:** No/No **SEPARATE SUB:** Yes **REMOTE CONTROL:** Yes **DIMENSIONS:** 1,047(w) x 66(h) x 83(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 3.5kg

FEATURES: Stream Control app with Deezer, Qobuz, Spotify, Tidal and internet radio; Surround and Hi-Fi modes; Bluetooth; wireless subwoofer

Definitive Technology W Studio Micro

This 'bar may not bother with Bluetooth but it has other things going for it...



AMERICAN BRANDS ARE known for big speakers and subwoofers, but the W Studio Micro sees US manufacturer Definitive Technology doing a rare bit of downsizing.

This slimmed-down version of its flagship W Studio soundbar/sub system is designed to integrate even more seamlessly into your home, but without compromising on sound quality.

Aluminium lends the slender enclosure strength and rigidity, while its angled lines are achingly modern. It's not as gob-smacking as the Cabasse or DALI models in this roundup, but fancy flourishes like the brushed top-panel, fabric grille and engraved Def Tech logo set it apart from your average budget 'bar. The ported sub is equally stylish and unobtrusive.

At 45mm high the soundbar should dip under most TV remote sensors, but like all the soundbars here it'll be too wide to pair with TVs under 50in. A row of pulsing lights on the front takes the place of an LED display, which is a little vague but you get used to it. Rear connections include two optical inputs, a joint USB/Ethernet port, a 3.5mm sub output and 3.5mm analogue input.

HDMI ports and Bluetooth are surprising omissions from the spec sheet but the rest is pretty healthy. The soundbar uses seven drivers across three channels, each one driven by a dedicated amp unit, although Def Tech keeps power ratings close to its chest. The left and right channels get a 3in mid/bass driver and 1in aluminium dome tweeter each, while the centre gets an extra mid/bass unit.

There's support for DTS Play Fi, a cross-brand multiroom platform that brings DLNA, Spotify, Amazon, Deezer and TIDAL streaming to the table. Add two of Def Tech's W7 or W9 speakers and Play Fi Surround allows you to create a 5.1 system – although at £400 and £600 respectively that's easier said than done.

I'm not sold on the DTS Play Fi app, though. The layout is counterintuitive in places and I had a few troubles getting music to stream, but at least NAS drives/PCs are easy to explore.

Full-size fun

Any misgivings are forgotten once you start playing movies. The Def Tech delivers a massive soundstage with impressive scale, sounding suspiciously like a full-size home cinema system. That's due largely to a powerful subwoofer that sends waves of deep bass through the room, but it's also helped by the bar's solid midrange and snappy delivery.

Spectre's opening sequence is again a thrilling blockbuster experience; as buildings collapse around Bond, the rumble is big and meaty but there's none of the booming that blights many a budget option.

Switch to *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and the soundbar renders the brutal gunplay with attack and vigour. The freeway shootout is peppered with terse gunshots, each one padded out with a puff of bass. Quick and agile, there's a real sense of energy.

It's not a sledgehammer approach though; there's silk behind the steel. Effects are beautifully detailed, from rustling footsteps to

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 4 x 1in mid/bass drivers; 3 x 1in aluminium dome tweeters

AMPLIFICATION (CLAIMED): N/A

CONNECTIONS: 2 x optical digital inputs; 3.5mm minijack input; 3.5mm subwoofer output; USB/Ethernet port

DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD MA: No/No

SEPARATE SUB: Yes **REMOTE CONTROL:** Yes

DIMENSIONS: 1,102(w) x 45(h) x 82(d)mm

WEIGHT: N/A

FEATURES: DTS Play Fi multiroom; DLNA streaming; Spotify, Amazon, Deezer and Tidal support; wireless subwoofer

gentle sibilance in Robert Redford's voice. The Def Tech's inherent transparency allows these top-end details to shine through, but a strong midrange and solid bass prevent it from sounding lean or clinical.

Separate tweeters and mid/bass units deliver a wide frequency response with smooth cohesion between the drivers. And this full-bodied presentation sounds as good with music as it does with movies.

Dialogue is remarkably clear and detailed courtesy of that dedicated centre channel. There's no surround processing here, but the soundstage is wide and immersive, a knock-on effect of the bar's generous dimensions. It does harden up when pushed to loud volumes, but that's the only real chink in its armour beyond those absent connections. ➤

DALI Kubik One

This glamour puss stereo 'bar doesn't ship with a subwoofer. But does it need one?



SUCCESSFULLY BLENDING CUTTING-EDGE design with audiophile sonics is no easy task, but it's something Danish brand DALI has achieved with the sublime Kubik One.

The first thing you'll notice is that it's a real looker. The removable grilles come in a choice of red, white or black as standard, but you can swap them for more exotic colours like Azur Blue and Misty Grey. The framework underneath is a single piece of extruded aluminium, which allows for a compact cabinet with thin walls that doesn't compromise on rigidity. The ends are capped by fetching brush-effect aluminium panels.

Tiny illuminated icons on the front tell you which input is selected and blink when receiving remote commands, but they're hard to read from the sofa. Essential buttonry is laid out in a line on top.

The only thing wrong with Kubik One's design is its height. It stands 162mm tall and doesn't lie flat, so it'll almost certainly block your TV remote sensor. My advice? Clear a shelf underneath or mount it on the wall using the rear keyhole fixings.

Kubik One is the only soundbar in this test that doesn't use an external subwoofer. You can add one thanks to the sub output on the back, but DALI is clearly confident that the two 5.25in wood fibre mid/bass cones will muster enough bass punch on their own. Two 1in soft dome tweeters complete the array.

A suggested 100W of power feeds the quartet. Connections include two optical inputs, analogue phono and a 3.5mm minijack on the

front. A micro USB port allows you to hook up a PC/Mac and play hi-res audio up to 96kHz/24-bit. On the wireless side there's apt-X Bluetooth but not a sniff of Wi-Fi or multiroom.

A switch on the back delivers three EQ settings – Neutral, Bass Enhance and Bass Boost. The latter might help if you have a large room, but the less intense Enhance mode suited me just fine.

The DALI awakens

The Kubik One has been around a while but remains an outstanding performer. With *The Force Awakens* on Blu-ray, as John Williams' theme kicks in you can hear the DALI's incredible attention to detail, teasing out oft-ignored percussion and giving the familiar brass melody a crisp leading edge.

During the First Order's raid on Jakku, this 'bar crafts an expansive soundstage without the comfort blanket of a subwoofer. There's plenty of bass weight as blasters, landing ships and flamethrowers roar into the room.

The sense of clarity here is truly wonderful. Effects are lucid and precise, while dialogue has bags of detail. Kylo Ren's voice is particularly expressive, with the drivers picking out the textures of his distorted delivery.

With *Spectre* the DALI offers an agile, engaging listen, with just enough top-end attack to sound exciting without hardening up. When Bond and Madeleine are attacked in the train carriage, the action is punchy and dynamic.

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 5.25in wood fibre cone mid/bass drivers; 2 x 1in soft dome tweeters

AMPLIFICATION (CLAIMED): 100W

CONNECTIONS: 2 x optical digital inputs; analogue phono input; 3.5mm minijack input; micro USB port

DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD MA: No/No

SEPARATE SUB: No **REMOTE CONTROL:** Yes

DIMENSIONS: 980(w) x 162(h) x 102(d)mm

WEIGHT: 9.6kg

FEATURES: Bluetooth; six optional coloured grilles; IR remote learning; Neutral, Bass Enhance and Bass Boost EQ modes

Even more impressive is how the DALI maintains its refined character at high volumes. Nothing phases it.

The only reservation I have concerns bass output – yes it's solid, well controlled and more powerful than any TV, but it can't quite summon the room-shaking thunder of an external subwoofer.

But the DALI makes up for that with its fluid, nuanced presentation. And if you're hoping to use the Kubik One as your hi-fi system, here's the clincher – it's the most musical soundbar in this group test. Meticulous timing, lavish detail and tight, agile bass make my test tracks really sing.

Couple that with a jaw-dropping design and you have one of the best high-end soundbars around.

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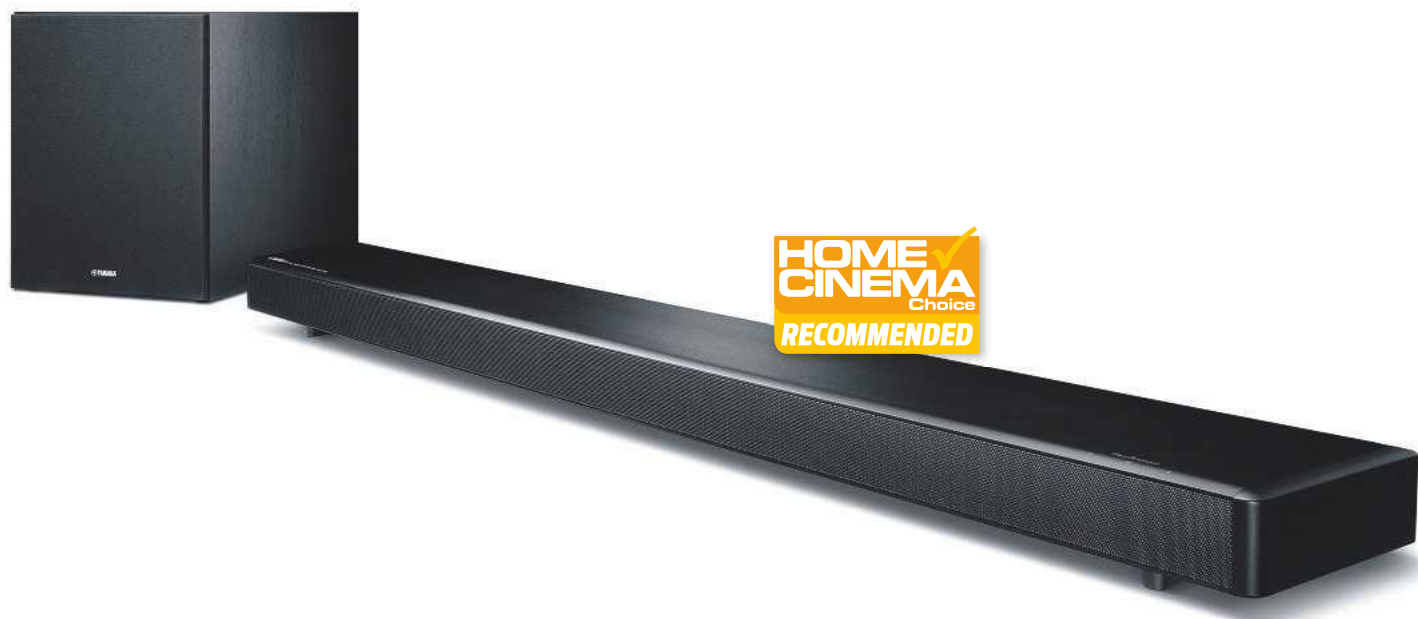
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Yamaha YSP-2700

When it comes to bonus features and home cinema immersion, this is hard to beat



YAMAHA'S REPLACEMENT FOR the lauded YSP-2500 is the only one of our quartet to have a punt at proper surround sound, which might push it to the top of your wishlist if you want to extract the most from your BD library.

Sixteen 2W drivers bounce soundbeams off the walls to deliver immersive 7.1-channel sound – a step up from the 5.1 YSP-2500 – while bass frequencies are bulked out by a 75W wireless subwoofer.

You can configure the beam settings yourself (using a scarily detailed onscreen setup menu or the superb MusicCast Controller app) or let the Intellibeam system auto EQ do it for you – place the setup mic on the supplied stand, run the test tones and after a few minutes the Yamaha has set the appropriate angles, distances and levels. It's quick and easy, and you can store the results in three memory presets.

In terms of design, the YSP-2700 won't win fashion awards but its black bodywork looks nice and sleek. The angled sides, brushed aluminium top panel and metal grille make it feel like a premium product, which at this price it should do. The cube subwoofer is also stylish and easy to accommodate.

Those with tiny TVs need not apply – at 944mm wide by 154mm deep, this is a big soundbar for big displays. It takes up a lot of surface area, but with a height of 51mm it didn't block my TV's remote sensor. Good job too, as there's no IR repeater on board. If you need it higher, attach the supplied feet or wall-mount using Yamaha's optional bracket.

Socketry is the most generous of the four models tested. Three HDMI inputs and one output pass through 4K/60p and HDCP 2.2, so your UHD Blu-ray deck is in good hands, while optical, coaxial, 3.5mm analogue and phono inputs cater for your other gear. A dedicated sub output is provided in case you have problems with the wireless connection. There's a flip-up antenna for Wi-Fi, or you can opt for Ethernet.

The feature list puts the competition to shame. There's Bluetooth, AirPlay and MusicCast support, which not only makes the YSP-2700 part of a multiroom system, but also offers Spotify, Napster, Qobuz and DLNA streaming (including hi-res audio up to 192kHz/24-bit). There's built-in Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD decoding, too.

Beam me up

In action the YSP-2700's beam tech generates a thoroughly immersive soundstage. Effects are shepherd around the room convincingly. Dialogue is nailed to the middle and the subwoofer lends ample weight to the action without overpowering the other drivers.

But to get the optimum results you'll need a room with walls close enough to bounce the beams off, and if there's any furniture in the way you can forget about authentic surround sound. My living room didn't seem suited to the full wraparound experience, but even so the Yamaha's wide soundstage and surround skills brought me closer to true home cinema than the other three challengers.

In other areas the YSP-2700 is a decent performer. It's exciting and attacking, with clear dialogue presentation and crisp treble, but it simply can't match the DALI and Cabasse for refinement and insight. Music playback is much the same – perfectly enjoyable but lacking in luxury. And while there are loads of Cinema DSP modes to explore most are easily ignored. I found myself flicking between Surround and Stereo modes.

If you're looking for immersive home cinema thrills then this is the soundbar for you, but listeners of a more musical bent or those after a more premium delivery would do well to also check out the sophisticated competition.

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 16 x 2.8cm beam drivers

AMPLIFICATION (CLAIMED): 107W

CONNECTIONS: 3 x HDMI inputs; HDMI output (ARC); optical digital input; coaxial digital input; 3.5mm minijack input; analogue phono input; subwoofer output; Ethernet
DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD MA: Yes/Yes
SEPARATE SUB: Yes **REMOTE CONTROL:** Yes
DIMENSIONS: 944(w) x 51(h) x 154(d)mm
WEIGHT: 4kg

FEATURES: AirPlay; Bluetooth; MusicCast multiroom with Spotify, Napster, Qobuz and DLNA streaming; auto calibration; wireless sub; 10 DSP modes; MusicCast Controller app; 4K/60p and HDCP 2.2 support

Final standings

THERE'S NO OBVIOUS wooden spoon to dish out here. All four of these soundbars deliver impressive sonics. That's encouraging news if you're spending this sort of money – quality should come as standard.

Despite that, the Yamaha YSP-2700 and Definitive Technology W Studio Micro narrowly find themselves missing out. The Yamaha is a magnificent soundbar in many respects, particularly when it comes to features – MusicCast, AirPlay, Bluetooth and multiple HDMI inputs put its specs head and shoulders above the competition. It also delivers the most home cinema-like performance of the bunch. Soundbeams bounced off walls bring you an enveloping soundstage with a distinct 5.1 flavour. But on the downside it lacks the sonic poise and finesse of its rivals, particularly when playing music. Still recommended, though.

With its hi-fi drivers and 3.1 configuration the Definitive Technology produces wonderful sound quality, blessed with superb transparency and detail, room-filling bass and clear dialogue. Yet it lets itself down on features and operation – there's no Bluetooth or HDMI ports, while DTS Play Fi lacks the slickness of rival multiroom apps.

Then come the DALI Kubik One and Cabasse Stream Bar. The former impressed me with its magnificent design and performance quality. Play a movie and you're instantly drawn into its sumptuous soundstage, which is powerful, insightful and cohesive. It lacks the ribcage-rattling bass of its subwoofer-toting rivals, but makes up for it with a rich, sophisticated presentation, and is the most musical soundbar of the bunch, which comes as no surprise given DALI's enviable hi-fi heritage.

But just pipping it to the post is the Cabasse Stream BAR, which boasts a sumptuous design (although I admit some may be less enamoured with its curves than I am), slick music streaming and terrific sound quality. Powerful, refined and articulate, listening to the Stream BAR is a joy with both movies and music, and the Stream Control app delivers hassle-free streaming. The inclusion of HDMI connectivity – missing from the DALI – seals the deal ■



HCC VERDICT

Cabasse Stream BAR

→ £850 → www.cabasse.com



DALI Kubik One

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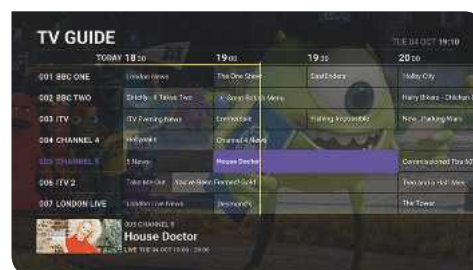
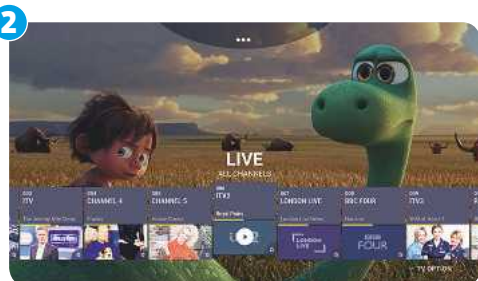
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Humax's short sharp shot of multiroom

Humax continues its recent 'coffee' theme with the TV-friendly H3 Espresso streamer. And it doesn't leave a nasty taste in [Martin Pipe](#)'s mouth

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Streaming
multimedia player

POSITION:
Versatile accessory
for FVP-4000T PVR

PEERS:
Roku 3;
Amazon Fire TV;
Chromecast 2

STAND-ALONE NETWORKED MULTIMEDIA players, which made regular appearances in *HCC* not so long ago, were somewhat edged out by market developments like smart TVs and feature-rich Blu-ray players. A few products – among them the Roku range, Chromecast, Now TV, Amazon Fire and Apple TV – have, however, kept alive the concept as a mass-market proposition. Designed to be as user-friendly as possible, they aim to lure prospective customers with attractive content or integrate seamlessly with subscription services. And more traditional features – like DLNA local network playback, 'net radio, etc – tend to feature too.

Into this pool of hardware, Humax's diminutive H3 Espresso has been thrown. Taking a different approach

when it comes to added value, this Android device dovetails with the firm's PVRs – specifically, the similarly coffee-flavoured (get it in Mocha or Cappuccino finishes) Freeview Play FVP-4000T. The basic idea is that you can stream TV channels – HD and SD alike – received via one of the FVP-4000T's three tuners to the H3, giving you low-cost Freeview multiroom if there's no aerial socket where you need one. More usefully, perhaps, you can also play recordings stored on the FVP-4000T's hard-disk and, courtesy of the H3's EPG, even schedule new recordings remotely. Streaming of TV can't, though, break through your home network, and so Slingbox-style remote viewing via the 'net isn't an option. But I suppose you can't expect everything for £80...

Get wired for success

A TV aerial may not be necessary in the room where the H3 is to be used, but to unlock its full potential the device obviously needs a reliable network connection. It supports (2.4/5GHz) Wi-Fi, but wired Ethernet is, of course, recommended if you'll be watching HD channels.

If you want to stream TV to an old telly, then you'll have to think again as the H3 makes no provision for analogue AV connections. It's HDMI only, although you do get an optical digital output that will route stereo or multichannel audio to an AV receiver.

Like the aforementioned competition, the H3 is easy to drive. Setup involves a wizard, while the user-interface is uncluttered and responsive.

You can use the supplied remote, or a Humax phone app, to operate the device. And the H3 itself harnesses apps to provide functionality. Some are pre-installed, while others are downloaded from the Humax Store. Netflix even gets its own dedicated button on the handset, Humax presumably regarding fuss-free delivery of this streaming service as another purchasing draw. You even get a month's use for free.

Other available apps include Live TV (the name of the aforementioned Humax TV streaming feature), Tuneln radio, a multimedia player (DLNA or USB), a web browser and YouTube. Then there's the TV Player catchup service. This caters for content from free-to-air channels like the BBC and ITV, and Humax has kindly bundled a two-month subscription that will unlock material from 30 premium 'plus' channels.

Meanwhile, users of Android phones (iOS devices aren't yet catered for) will appreciate the Wireless Display app's ability to blow up their mobile screens to TV size, while the MyClassicLP music streaming service will appeal to lovers of classical tunes. More esoteric are Arirang TV (content from South Korea, Humax's home country), eye tests, an animated version of *The Little Mermaid* children's story and SlideShare (presentations, documents and business-

'Some apps are pre-installed on the H3 – Netflix even gets its own dedicated button on the Humax handset'

oriented info on your TV). And if you have one of the Humax Eye security cameras reviewed in *HCC* recently [#266], an app will grant you access to it via the H3.

Pictures and sound are as good as the source allows. Some of the streaming services can look awful, as they're carried at a low bitrate. The TV Player, which annoyingly integrates advertising, didn't at the time of writing offer any form of playback manipulation. None of the H3 remote's transport controls had any effect; frustratingly, you can't even pause playback. The organisation of content leaves much to be desired, too. I'd hope that the 'genuine articles' – BBC iPlayer, 4oD *et al* – will be added as apps, as they're sorely missed here.

Thankfully, good ol' broadcast TV reveals the H3's true AV potential. I connected a Humax FVP-4000T PVR and the smaller media player to the HDMI inputs of my Samsung TV. Switching between the two revealed little difference in terms of picture quality – even with the telling Freeview HD channels. There's plenty of visual snap and

SPECIFICATIONS

HDD: No **CONNECTIONS:** HDMI output; optical digital audio output; USB 2.0; Ethernet **AUDIO FORMAT SUPPORT:** Dolby Digital (as 5.1 bitstream to optical); MP3; AAC; WAV; FLAC **VIDEO FORMAT SUPPORT:** MPEG-1/2 (inc. individual files of VIDEO_TS DVD rips); DivX; MKV; H.264 **DIMENSIONS:** 95(w) x 18(h) x 95(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 187g

FEATURES: Wi-Fi (dual-band); Bluetooth 4.0; LiveTV streaming/broadcast (with Humax FVP-4000T PVR); Netflix; Tuneln radio; YouTube; DLNA/USB multimedia player; Android KitKat-based firmware; TVPlayer catch-up; support for Humax/Y-Cam 'Eye' security camera; HumaxCast control app available; Wireless Display screen-mirroring (Android devices)

PARTNER WITH



HUMAX FVP-4000T: This triple-tuner Freeview Play PVR (which can record four channels simultaneously) is available in 500GB (£200), 1TB (£230) and 2TB (£300) iterations. The H3 can be used with it as a client box, multiroom-style.

detail, while colours are portrayed naturally. Furthermore, recordings stored on the PVR streamed flawlessly. Note, though, that the H3 doesn't – unlike the FVP-4000T – cover DVB subtitles, audio descriptions or digital 'red button' teletext.

Even as it is, the H3 is a natural partner for the FVP-4000T. It can be seen, almost, as the Freeview equivalent of the Sky Q Mini add-on. Yet one bug could impair your enjoyment. Always stick with the 'auto' display resolution during the setup phase. You get manual 720p, 1080i and 1080p options (no 4K support here) but with these the refresh rate is fixed at 60Hz. As a result, there's annoying motion-judder with most UK-sourced material. With the default 'auto' option, though, the refresh rate is automatically set to the correct 50Hz.

The Humax's onboard DLNA media player is compatible with most common media types – MKV, MPG and DivX video, as well as MP3 and FLAC audio. However, it's rather basic in feature terms and no substitute for one of the enthusiast-grade units available; there's a 'screen fit' option and external subtitle files are supported, but it can't cope with multiple soundtracks (only the first is playable) or DVD .ISO images (which offer users a virtual DVD experience, complete with menus). Sometimes, files stored on a NAS (or the FVP-4000T's basic DLNA server) took a while to get started. But it's worth the wait, as image and sound quality again proved excellent.

Clever addition

Overall, the H3 performs well, is well priced and makes for a clever addition to Humax's own PVR. As a standalone streamer, though, it's not amongst the current top tier (it lacks 4K support, for one thing), and its TV Player app feels a little rough and ready ■

HCC VERDICT



Humax H3 Espresso

→ £80 → uk.humaxdigital.com

WE SAY: Well worth considering if you have an FVP-4000T and a second-room screen. A fair standalone option, too, but not without some drawbacks.

1. Humax's puck-shaped streamer is only 18mm high

2. The H3's user interface is crisp and colourful; the EPG has a live PiP window

**GONE TO GROUND**

TV show *Agent Carter* wraps up with its second season p96

Supersize 4K for less

Boasting top-tier streaming 4K services, this cost-conscious HDR-ready Hisense is quite the bigscreen temptation, says **Steve May**

IF YOU'RE WINDOW shopping with TV checklist in hand, there's not much the 65in Hisense H65M5500 doesn't offer: 4K resolution, connected streaming services, high dynamic range compatibility – tick, tick and tick.

Yet regular readers will know that not all HDR TVs are cut from the same cloth, and certainly not those woven from budget thread. So let's concentrate instead on the real story here – a ferociously-specified super-sized 4K screen for a good deal less than a grand. Colour me excited.

Big but beautiful

Design wise, the big M5500 looks the part. Its silver-fox finish is on the right side of elegant, and it's solidly built, hefting onto the scales at 30kg. Pedestal feet at either end require suitably wide furniture, of course. If Henry Ford black is more your style, Hisense has the K5510. There's no other difference between the two models except aesthetic hue.

Connectivity betrays the screen's cut-price nature, in that of the four HDMI's, only two are 4K HDCP 2.2-enabled. This could limit your system-building ambitions if you're not using an AVR as a switching hub or if said AVR is itself

not up to modern-day spec. There's also a trio of USB ports, an optical digital audio output, plus Scart and component AV terminals that will likely never get a look in. Ethernet is supported by Wi-Fi.

Hisense likes to keep its user interface tidy and navigation is helped by a quad-core processor and some natty functionality. For instance, the remote's D-pad allows one button access to the Recommendation bar, although at the moment this consists largely of movies from Chili Cinema (sci-fi classic *Terrordactyl* anyone?). A different direction allows you to timeshift Freeview HD broadcasts to a connected USB drive.

In truth, the set's connected platform is a bit random, with a surfeit of Euro apps of limited interest to UK goggleboxers – a by-product of Hisense's licencing deal with the Foxxum app store portal, which covers a total of 15 countries. The good news is that uppermost in this esoteric mix are Netflix, Amazon Video and YouTube – all of which can stream 4K content, thanks to onboard HEVC and VP9 decoding.

Other streaming services of note include BBC iPlayer, Wuaki.TV, Deezer and Daily Motion. A built-in web browser is thrown in for good measure.

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
65in 4K HDR
flatscreen

POSITION:
One of Hisense's
mid-priced options

PEERS:
Panasonic
TX-58DX700B;
Samsung
UE55KS7000

The TV wants to play ball with your smart devices (via Anyview Cast) and home media (Anyview Stream). The onboard media player is talented. It had no problem locating my Twonky server, and file compatibility includes MKV, MPEG and FLAC, which should cover most of the good stuff you have.

While HDR 10 gets the welcome mat here, 3D is no longer invited in. This is either a pain if you've been investing in 3D Blu-rays, or a matter of no significance.

Cinematic scale

What is of significance is the M5500's image quality, which is rather delightful considering the price. This 65-incher wears its scale well. Fine detail reproduction is excellent, colour performance vibrant and dynamics often surprisingly effective.

But to get the best from the screen, you need to go against the grain. Image modes comprise Standard, Cinema, Dynamic, PC/Game and HDR, and there's also a rich vein of deeper control. In addition to regular brightness, contrast and colour sliders, the Advanced Picture Settings sub-menu lets users tinker with Adaptive Contrast, Dynamic Backlight Control, and colour management, white balance and flesh tone adjustment.

With most HD content, the out-of-the-box Standard setting typically offers the best brightness/contrast balance for everyday ambient room lighting. However, this Hisense really begins to sing when you watch on its Dynamic setting. Normally you would rightly run screaming from the room if anyone suggested such madness, but Dynamic here isn't quite the retina rave-up you might expect. All picture modes accurately deliver 2,160p resolution, but a 4K test pattern confirms that Dynamic puts the clearest level of UHD detail onscreen. It also squeezes maximum colour use from the panel. The combination is really quite engaging. The underrated Will Smith superhero movie *Hancock* (4K UHD Blu-ray) looks seriously sharp, colour rich and cinematic.

There are inevitable caveats to performance. The M5500 lacks any effective interpolation to retain detail in fast motion. Consequently its Ultra Smooth Motion image processing is actually used just for smoothing horizontal pans. On any setting above Low it introduces ugly motion artefacts, so go easy.

Backlight uniformity isn't perfect either, but this is probably to be expected from an edge-lit TV writ large and priced low (Hisense's ULED tech, which employs a local dimming direct backlight, features on the pricier M7000 series). Unwanted light splodges only really become obvious on full black sequences, but more stability would have been welcome. And the set's black level performance is reasonable, rather than superlative.

The M5500 auto-selects HDR mode when it receives an HDR signal, be it from UHD Blu-ray or games console (neither the Netflix or Amazon apps were HDR savvy at the time of test – as usual, look out for firmware updates). However, running the TV with HDR Blu-rays and HDR-enabled games via a PS4 Pro reveals clipping on bright highlights. The set's tone mapping seems a bit all over the place.



SPECIFICATIONS

3D: No **4K:** Yes. 3,840 x 2,160 resolution **HDR:** Yes. HDR 10. **TUNER:** Yes. Freeview HD and DVB-S satellite **CONNECTIONS:** 4 x HDMI inputs; 3 x USB inputs (1 x v3.0); Scart; component AV; Ethernet; optical digital audio output **SOUND:** 2 x 15W **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** N/A **CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED):** N/A **DIMENSIONS:** 1,458(w) x 898(h) x 315(d)mm **WEIGHT (OFF STAND):** 31kg

FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; USB multimedia playback; DLNA media playback; PVR recording to USB; Smart Hub with streaming apps (including Netflix, Amazon Video, YouTube, BBC iPlayer); Anyview Cast; Dbx-tv/TruSurround audio processing; Dynamic Contrast; 2 x HDCP 2.2 HDMI inputs

PARTNER WITH



SONY PLAYSTATION 4 PRO: Use the 65in Hisense for largescale, next-gen console fun. Sony's latest PlayStation delivers 4K and HDR gaming, with a growing range of titles covering everything from sports sims to shoot-em ups. Price is £350.

Subsequently, this isn't the screen to bowl you over with HDR's subtler appeal.

Upscaling isn't a particular strength either. Playing the St Quentin Scar map on *Battlefield 1* reveals its limitations – the power lines which run above the terrain showcase clear jaggies.

The set's audio performance is enhanced by the Dbx-tv Total Technology processing suite, with various tools on offer. Total Sonics offers a customised frequency response, with dynamic bass boost and '3D sound.' Total Volume combats sound fluctuation, by keeping noise levels consistent across channels and content. Total Surround... doesn't. Generally, the set goes loud, but the mid-range vocal performance is a little sharp.

In the right direction

The 65in Hisense H65M5500 is a creditable super-screen, and an encouraging indicator of where Hisense is heading. As long as you don't expect flagship image quality for less than £1,000, you're not likely to be disappointed – those

seeking a premium picture performance either need to up their budget or compromise with a smaller size display.

This TV looks genuinely cinematic with Blu-rays, and is full of snap when streaming UHD from Netflix and Amazon Video. HDR hyperbole should be taken with a pinch of salt, but at least it means you won't get an error screen whenever you play UHD Blu-ray content.

Window shoppers have never had it so good... ■

1. Hisense's 65-incher uses an LED edge-lit LCD panel

2. Although the M5500 offers 4K Netflix and Amazon, these apps don't yet support HDR

HCC VERDICT



Hisense H65M5500

→ £800 → www.hisense.co.uk

WE SAY: This budget bigscreen offers cinematic pictures and the trinity of streaming 4K services at a cracking price. Not the last word in image quality, but its target market may not care.

Philips shrink-bar

Do you need a huge soundbar to create a big sound?

Steve May gets nano with Philips' slender contender

The soundbar packs an HDMI input and output



IS THE TIME right to downsize that soundbar? Well, with set-top boxes, games consoles, Blu-ray players and jumbo bags of Maltesers all vying for space beneath your flatscreen, real estate is increasingly precious, so if you can shrink without impacting sound quality, going nano clearly makes a lot of sense. Enter the Philips Fidelio B1. Just 41cm wide, this bijou 'bar hardly draws attention to itself. Even the wireless subwoofer is

impressively slim. But can a small soundbar still do your Blu-ray collection justice?

The B1 'bar offers a curved-edge design, combining aluminium and black fabric grilles. It looks good, and feels worthy of its considerable asking price.

Around the rear you'll find an HDMI

input plus an HDMI ARC output, 3.5mm minijack, USB and optical digital audio port. Neither HDMI port supports 4K HDCP 2.2, so any 4K source (Sky Q, UHD Blu-ray, etc) will need to be routed to a UHD screen direct. Bluetooth (with NFC pairing) is onboard, but there's no DLNA or multiroom talents to get excited about.

Where the wide things are

For such a compact enclosure, the B1 creates a surprisingly wide soundstage, and there's sufficient volume on tap; I don't think you'll have a problem filling a smallish viewing room. Behind the grille are four drivers, two at the sides and two in the centre. Arranged in a cross-firing configuration, they create a relatively expansive sweet spot. A pair of additional soft dome tweeters in the top of the unit, used with an 18-hole waveguide, function as a virtual speaker array to heighten the soundstage. The B1 can handle a 5.1 bitstream and aggregates its amplifier modules to claim multichannel credibility, but it doesn't convince in any *faux* surround regard. But when it comes to a wall of sound, it's undeniably convincing.

The overall performance of the 'bar and subwoofer duo is solid. The B1's sonic

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 6 x racetrack drivers
AMPLIFICATION (CLAIMED): 120W (soundbar)
CONNECTIONS: HDMI input; HDMI output with ARC; 3.5mm stereo minijack; USB; optical digital input
DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD MA: No/No
SEPARATE SUB: Yes. Wireless
REMOTE CONTROL: Yes
DIMENSIONS: 408(w) x 56.7(h) x 115(d)mm
WEIGHT: 7.56kg
FEATURES: Bluetooth aptX; tweeter wave-guide; auto volume leveller; microbeam speaker technology; music/movie audio processing modes; sub stand

signature is energetic, and dialogue delivery benefits from a clean mid-range.

The subwoofer is a front-ported MDF enclosure, just 86mm deep. The package includes a plastic stand to position it vertically. You could possibly lay it flat under a sofa, but given that the soundbar has little to offer below 200Hz, placement is rather crucial. Keep it close to the main soundbar for best integration.

If you want to add weight to action movie soundtracks, the B1 doesn't disappoint. It moves air with startling efficiency. In fact, viewing *Mad Max: Fury Road*, I felt the need to wind bass in a bit via the B1's remote control to achieve a better balance.

Game title *Battlefield 1* is a thunderous, visceral experience and the B1 goes to war with admirable enthusiasm.

If this soundbar does have a limitation it's with streamed music. While there's no issue with functionality – pairing over Bluetooth is a snap – presentation is too much blunt force trauma, and not enough grace and fluidity. A dedicated Music mode helps smooth out delivery and removes the mid-range lift which helps keep film dialogue clear, but that doesn't improve basic musicality.

This svelte soundbar system delivers pretty much what you'd want. It makes a big, exciting sound that belies its smart, compact design. Best partnered with sub-50in flatscreens, it's equal fun with blockbuster movies and game soundtracks.

Philips' microbeaming drivers are less adept with music, though, which may be a concern if you intend to use the B1 as a multipurpose sound system. Furthermore, the price tag here feels a little on the high side considering the strengths of the varied competition ■

AV INFO

PRODUCT: Compact soundbar/subwoofer system

POSITION: Sits below Philips' Fidelio B8 Dolby Atmos package

PEERS: Bose Cinemate 15; Acoustic Energy Aego Sound3ar

HCC VERDICT



Philips Fidelio B1

→ £450 → www.philips.co.uk

WE SAY: This good-looking compact 2.1 soundbar system is too heavy-handed for music but packs plenty of slam for movies and games.

Amazon Echo Dot

This is the smart upgrade your AV system has been waiting for, says **Steve May**

THE DOT IS a stripped-down version of the Amazon Echo smart speaker [see HCC #267]. This precocious pill lacks that model's omnidirectional speaker, but offers the same Alexa smart assistance. As with the Echo, you can use the Dot to manage connected heating systems, dim Hue lights, ask for news and weather updates, and play music from streaming services or your own library.

Compact and well made, the Dot is available in either white or black but can be pimped at extra cost with a variety of fashionable leather or fabric cases.

It features the same seven-microphone array as the bigger Echo, which enables it to hear across a large room, and retains noise-cancelling technology to distinguish commands when playing music. A cool blue light on its rim confirms that the Dot has heard its wake-up word.

There's a simple monophonic speaker onboard, but while fine for spoken alerts,

HOME CINEMA
Choice
BEST BUY



alarms and kitchen timers, you really wouldn't want to use it for music playback; far better to pair the Dot over Bluetooth with a compatible speaker, or hardwire into a sound system using the 3.5mm line out.

I hooked up my Dot to an AV receiver, with a minijack to stereo phono lead. Using voice control via my AV system proves quite the game-changer. The Dot quickly became my *de facto* way of using streaming audio services – voice recognition here really is excellent.

The Dot offers a 3.5mm jack for system integration

The quality of the stereo stream from Spotify and Amazon Prime Music is perfectly acceptable, while internet radio and podcasts via TuneIn are crisp and clear.

More affordable than its stablemate, yet more versatile thanks to its line output (which the larger Echo lacks), Amazon's Echo Dot is an extremely enticing smart assistant. What you get out of it depends on what hardware you have in terms of home control, but for the hands-free music playback skills and general sense of fun it's easily worth its £50 ticket. And integrated into a traditional AV system, it's akin to giving your AVR a brain transplant ■

HCC VERDICT



Amazon Echo Dot

→ £50 → www.amazon.co.uk

WWW.DEVOLO.CO.UK/£50

Devolo Wi-Fi ac Repeater

Might this gadget solve your Wi-Fi woes? **Martin Pipe** finds out

OKAY, YOU MAY not be able to influence who manages your football team or cook like Gordon Ramsay, but better Wi-Fi is something within your grasp. The traditional approach is to install an additional access point, possibly one that communicates with your router via mains wiring. German company Devolo sells complete 'Wi-Fi extender' kits for such purposes.

It also sells this neat little device, the Wi-Fi ac Repeater. Resembling a chunky mains plug, with a fetching column of white signal-strength LEDs, its purpose is in essence to receive and distribute signals to and from your existing Wi-Fi point (typically the one built into your router) at a claimed maximum of 1,200Mbps. Installation is literally plug and play; push it into a mains socket located between your existing access point and wherever Wi-Fi is needed.

Push-button WPS configuration is an option, or you can set up the unit directly via Wi-Fi. In its configuration webpage, your target Wi-Fi network (2.4GHz or 5GHz) is specified.

HOME CINEMA
Choice
BEST BUY



There are two usage modes. As a repeater, it duplicates your existing network (albeit only on 2.4GHz). The same passkey gains access; your Wi-Fi devices will then connect to whichever of the two is strongest. AP (Access Point), meanwhile, gives you a new access point with its own passkey.

The Wi-Fi ac Repeater performed as expected, and I was able to seamlessly connect to a wireless network that was too distant for reliable transfer. The Humax H3 (see p66) was able to stream TV and HD footage without glitches. I could also simultaneously connect a smartphone to it; Devolo claims that the number of users is limited only by your router's capabilities. Useful, easy to install and recommended ■

HCC VERDICT



Devolo Wi-Fi ac Repeater

→ £50 → www.devolo.co.uk

The plug also offers an Ethernet port for hard-wired kit

4K curve ball

Is Samsung's 43in curved UHD TV big enough to matter?

John Archer investigates

DRILLER KILLER

Oil disaster drama *Deepwater Horizon* surfaces on Blu p94



I KNOW WHAT you're thinking: getting one of Samsung's Quantum Dot, Ultra HD and high dynamic range TVs for £750 sounds like a good idea. But I'm not convinced it's quite the bargain it first appears.

That said, the UE43KS7500 will probably have many casual punters at 'hello'. With its lean metallic silver frame, curved screen and impressive build quality, it stands out from any shop shelf.

For me, though, the curved screen is the first concerning thing about this bargain-priced Samsung. Curved screens usually only make sense (if it all) on really large TVs given their tendency to limit viewing angles and distort image geometry. Also, it seems you're paying at least a small premium for the curve; while there's no 43in version of Samsung's

flat alternative range, the KS7000 series, you can get the 49in iteration for only £100 more.

As with all of Samsung's SUHD TVs, the UE43KS7500's connections are mostly found on an external One Connect box, and include four HDMI, three USBs and wired and

wireless network support, enabling streaming from DLNA-enabled devices along with access to Samsung's online services. These currently include Amazon Prime Video, Netflix, and three of the UK's 'big four' catchup portals, with All4 being omitted.

Crammed inside the TV's 43in screen is an Ultra HD pixel count of 3,840 x 2,160, an edge-LED lighting system capable of pumping out 1,000 nits of HDR-friendly brightness, and a colour system built around Quantum Dot technology capable of delivering comfortably more than 90 per cent of the DCI colour spectrum. This is the level demanded by the industry's 'Ultra HD Premium' recommended HDR specifications.

Black level Apocalypse

Feeding the Samsung the Ultra HD Blu-ray of *X-Men: Apocalypse* finds it doing a mostly excellent job. Dark scenes such as the rediscovery of Apocalypse in his long-buried 'tomb' benefit from deep, rich black levels that are hard to find on any other brand of TV at the same price point.

The HDR-enriched colours of Mystique in her blue form and Psylocke's glowing swords, meanwhile, look radiantly vibrant and bold thanks to the UE43KS7500's combination of more brightness and a wider colour spectrum. Actually the whole image feels opened up in colour and contrast terms, giving you a more palpable sense of HDR's potential than any

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: No. **4K:** Yes. 3,840 x 2,160 **HDR:** Yes. HDR10 **TUNER:** Yes. Freeview HD; Freesat HD **CONNECTIONS:** 4 x HDMI inputs; 3 x USB; tuner input; Ethernet; optical digital audio output **SOUND:** 2 x 20W **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** N/A **CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED):** N/A **DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND):** 956.5(w) x 554.5(h) x 83.1(d)mm **WEIGHT (OFF STAND):** 10.6kg

FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; USB multimedia playback; DLNA multimedia playback; depth processing for curved screen; Tizen-based smart TV system; HDCP 2.2 support

Does a 43in TV benefit from a curved panel? Not really

other brand has managed to date on a sub-£1,000 TV.

The set is accurate and clean enough with its 4K picture playback, too, to reveal at least a sense of its native 4K pixel count during ultra-detailed *Apocalypse* shots, such as the one where Xavier talks to a group of students in his mansion. However, while I'd never say you need a 65in TV or bigger to see the benefits of Ultra HD resolution, it's a fact that the UE43KS7500 doesn't make all those pixels count as spectacularly from normal viewing distances as bigger models – including the UE49KS7000 mentioned earlier. But try buying a 43in Full HD TV these days...

This curved cutie also loses out against the KS7000 with its backlight management. The dark *Apocalypse* rediscovered sequence is hampered by more backlight clouding in the lower half of the picture than you get with any of the KS7000 models I've seen. This is, I'd guess, a result of it being harder to control edge LED illumination within curved screens.

Strong performer

Considered against other brands of TV in the same price bracket, Samsung's UE43KS7500 is a strong performer, especially as it's also an excellent upscaler of HD sources and partners its often fine pictures with some well-rounded and robust audio.

In the end, though, I have to question the need for a curved screen on a 43in TV. It seems a bit frivolous, and Samsung itself sells better-performing – and, crucially, larger – flatscreen UHD TVs for only a little more cash ■

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
43in Ultra HD Premium TV

POSITION:
Towards the bottom of Samsung's Quantum Dot SUHD range

PEERS:
Samsung UE49KS7000; Panasonic TX-50DX700

HCC VERDICT

★★★★★

Samsung UE43KS7500

→ £750 → www.samsung.co.uk

WE SAY: A mostly superior Ultra HD and HDR TV – though it suffers in comparison with its own flat-screened KS7000 siblings.

Plantronics BackBeat Pro 2

Wireless over-ears with an indomitable battery life? **Steve May** gets paired

PLANTRONICS' SECOND-GENERATION BACKBEAT Pro Bluetooth headphones are an intriguing mix of value and spec.

A smart sensor in the right ear cup pauses audio when you take them off, and resumes it when you put them back on. You can connect two devices simultaneously, and there are dual mics when you need to take a call. Battery life is cited at 24 hours, but in typical use you can go for several days without charging. The ear cups pivot two ways and fold-flat, so they can be popped into the protective bag provided.

While you'll probably use them wirelessly on your commute, a 3.5mm cable is provided for wired/in-flight entertainment. Track navigation is via the touch-sensitive left ear cup, but the volume control feels plasticky and crude.

Audio quality is average. The Pro 2s use 40mm drivers and detail is high (if granular) but bass is limited. I paired the 'phones with



The cans will pause your tunes when removed. Clever

a Sony High Res Walkman and an Amazon Fire TV for in-home lounging. While I'd wear them for the odd episode of *The Grand Tour* or *Daredevil*, I'd not want to wear them for an over-extended blockbuster. They play music but they're not musical.

On-demand noise-cancelling isn't massively effectively either (certainly not comparable to what you can get with the likes of the admittedly more expensive Sony MDR-1000X). It just dulls the background a tad.

These really score over rival cans when it comes to price. At just £230, you'll make quite a saving over better-known brands. If functionality and price are paramount, they're certainly worth an audition ■

HCC VERDICT ★★★★★

Plantronics BackBeat Pro 2
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Roberts R1

Roberts' multiroom line has a DAB-free model that'll save you £70. **Mark Craven** reports

THE R1 IS the more affordable stablemate to Roberts' £250 R100 DAB/multiroom speaker [HCC #265]. Only here, the DAB functionality

has been jettisoned, making it a more traditional Bluetooth/network speaker. Also AWOL is the top-panel menu screen, replaced by a few control buttons and status LEDs.

This means that for the majority of tasks you'll have to use the third-party Undok app. This is not a major crisis as the app is well-designed while the OSD of the R100 could occasionally be frustrating to operate.

With Bluetooth, Spotify, USB and whatever you can punt to the R1 via your smart device or networked kit all on offer, it's a speaker that throws open its arms in a welcome embrace. And this, along with the agreeable design, is its strongest point, over and above sound quality. Like

the R100, the performance is a little rough around the edges, particularly straight of the box. Adjusting the EQ settings to find a better balance of frequencies is recommended.

It does impress with its sheer volume, and bass punch from its active/passive driver combination is good, although the tone lacks warmth. With higher frequencies being quite overtly bright, this is a speaker more suited to burbling away in a corner than taking centre stage for critical music listening.

And don't be fooled by the R1's carry-handle strap. It's a mains-powered speaker, and true portability comes at the cost of £40 for an additional battery pack.

Preferable, perhaps, to the R100, but still not a killer option in this price range ■



The R1 ditches the R100's LCD display

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Digital Copy

The 3D format is facing its biggest fight yet, says **Mark Craven**, while admitting that sometimes he wishes he wasn't upgrading his AV system incrementally

LATE LAST YEAR I used this column to poke my angry stick (which is a bit worn these days) at Samsung and Philips, despondent at those companies opting to remove 3D playback functionality from their 2016 displays. A few of you have written in to the mag in support of my argument; some have suggested that it's right that the AV world moves on from a faltering format in pursuit of brighter, more dynamic thrills.

Now LG has jumped ship. The Korean TV manufacturer has announced an eye-catching new range of OLED TVs at this year's CES, but killed off its passive 3D technology. Likewise, future OLED screens from Panasonic and Sony will be 3D ignorant, too.

This has led to more correspondence from angry cinephiles. And, as you can see from our letters pages, there's now even a petition (aimed at LG) asking for 3D to be brought back into service in 2018. Sadly, I feel it will fall upon deaf ears. The future of 3D, if it has one, is likely in some as-yet unrealised glasses-free technology, and those fighting to save its current iteration face a scrap harder than the Battle of Thermopylae. And if you've seen Zack Snyder's *300* (pictured), you'll know how that turned out...

Enjoy it while you can

All this means owners of LG's most recent OLED screens are no doubt rubbing their hands with glee. These sets could turn out to be the Pioneer Kuros of their generation, heralded by movie fans and kept in service long after others have succumbed to newer models. If you were thinking of buying one because you wanted the whole passive 3D/4K/HDR (with Dolby Vision)/OLED mashup, then you should probably do so quick.

Or, actually, should you? The consumer electronics world is in such a state of flux at the moment (I won't even get into HDMI 2.1...) that anyone who decides to hold tight on their current system won't get any tut-tutting from me. It's ever so easy to be enticed by new AV toys, but there's only so many times you can sell-on existing kit and reinvest in upgrades.

Furthermore, there's a lot to be said to being one of the later entrants to a particular tech. This point was reinforced to me this Christmas when I was demonstrating Ultra HD Blu-ray to a family member (who wanted to know what HDR was all about). What really surprised me is that they were much more taken aback by the increased detail and clarity. It was then that I remembered their current TV is 32in and Full HD, and that this was their first experience of 4K. Compare that to the average AV-Holic who has possibly been watching everything upscaled to 2,160p for the best part of four years. The new delights of UHD disc, Netflix 4K and Sky Q don't look quite so shiny.

Or imagine – if you will allow me a flight of fancy – the person who upgrades their system from a 28in CRT and VHS deck to a 65in OLED with 4K sources. **We talk often about a 'jaw-dropping' experience; this would be the real deal.**

It's a point I've raised before, but whether you're viewing movies on a Full HD flatscreen with a soundbar or have your own bespoke projection-based theatre, we're all in this hobby for the same reasons. There's no right way to be a home cinema enthusiast: the tent is big enough for 3D haters, 3D stalwarts, early adopters and reluctant upgraders. Happy camping in 2017... ■

*How often do you upgrade your TV or projector?
Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com*

If **Mark Craven** is certain of one thing in life, it's that he wouldn't have lasted five seconds at the Battle of Thermopylae





Film Fanatic

Anton van Beek is struggling to come to terms with cinephiles who dismiss superhero movies out of hand. Even more so when they happen to be one of his colleagues

I'M GOING TO let you in on a little secret: my HCC teammate Mark Craven hates superhero movies. Okay, maybe 'hates' is too strong a word. Rather, he has little interest in them, and his viewing habits of the latest crop are wonderfully random. He's sat through kit demonstrations featuring *Avengers: Assemble* countless times, yet never watched the movie the whole way through (but did go out to the cinema to see its sequel). He's watched *The Dark Knight*, but not *The Dark Knight Rises*.

I'm pretty certain he views comic book movies as one giant collage of the same plots, characters and CG-heavy finales. And he's not alone in feeling that way. No matter where you turn there's always someone carping on about the glut of comic book blockbusters filling theatres at the moment. And I'm not just talking about the stuffy critics who hate popcorn movies.

This is like somebody in the 1940s moaning about Hollywood's obsession with film noir, or living through the 1950s and bitching about all of the Westerns. It's also not true.

Okay, I'll admit that there are plenty of superhero movies doing the rounds these days. This year will see seven more hitting our screens: *The LEGO Batman Movie*, *Logan*, *Guardians of the Galaxy: Vol. 2*, *Wonder Woman*, *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, *Thor: Ragnarok* and *Justice League*. But does this mean we've reached saturation point? No, because we live in an age where more films than ever are being released into cinemas, not to mention those making their debut on VOD services like Netflix.

And as our guide to 2017's biggest movies (see p24) shows, even if superhero films aren't your thing, you're still going to be spoiled for choice when it comes to other types of blockbusters playing at your multiplex. Don't want to watch the new

Spider-Man film? Then head to Screen Two and catch the latest entry in the *Planet of the Apes* franchise instead.

A *Winter...* wonderland

The real travesty of all of this is that those who simply dismiss superhero movies as a whole and give them a wide berth are missing out on some of the best Hollywood productions of their generation. There's the odd stinker along the way, but the same is true of any genre.

As it is, I'll happily hold up Marvel's 2014 smash *Captain America: Winter Soldier* as the best action blockbuster this side of 1999's *The Matrix*. I can't wrap my head around the idea that anybody could fail to be satisfied with its energetic mix of bruising action scenes and Cold War paranoia.

It's a film I'd happily introduce HCC's editor to if it wasn't for the fact that, in order to appreciate all of its nuances, it would help if he'd seen *Captain America: The First Avenger* and *Avengers Assemble* in full. And it's here that the trouble with the shared cinematic universe concept comes into play.

The superhero films of Marvel/Disney and DC Comics/Warner are designed to stand on their own two feet, but they also build on what has gone before. You can't expect *...The Winter Soldier's* emotional beats and references to resonate as well with anyone who hasn't seen the previous films.

The solution, of course, is to lock my colleague indoors for a weekend and force him to sit through a Marvel Blu-ray marathon. Either that, or wait until Liam Neeson, Denzel Washington or Jason Statham appear in a superhero film. Then there'll probably be no stopping him ■

Do you think there are too many superhero films being made? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

Anton van Beek is counting on the craze for superhero films lasting long enough to see Marvel's Squirrel Girl get an outing on the bigscreen





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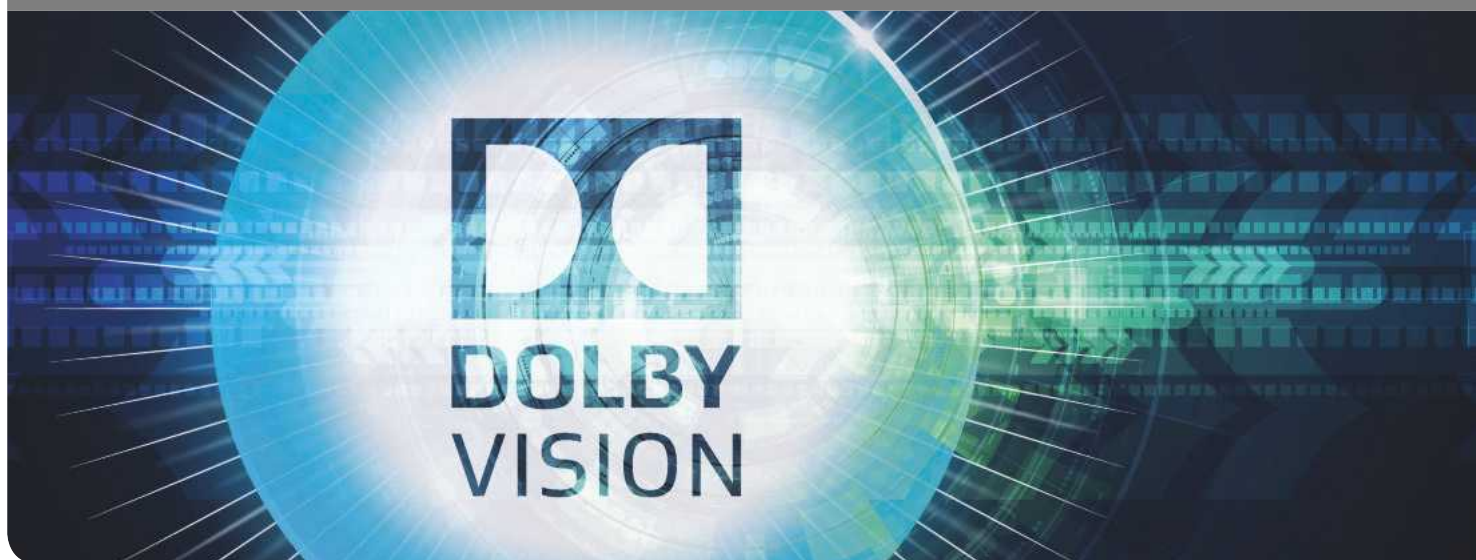
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In The Mix

Jon Thompson applauds Panasonic's decision to bring pro-grade tools to its future OLED TV, but believes it (and others) are missing a trick by ignoring Dolby Vision HDR

THE CES EXPO is over for another year with the battle lines drawn for the next 12 months and, in the process, changing the status quo that was Ultra HD Blu-ray and UHD TV.

The news that we have all be waiting for, and predicted in this column some time back, is the expansion of Dolby Vision support, both in terms of domestic displays and players. UHD decks touted at CES from LG and Philips will be Dolby Vision-compatible, to join Oppo's UDP-203, which will receive a firmware update.

Odder news is that Sony has embraced Dolby Vision for (some of) its new TVs, yet seems to have dropped the UHD Blu-ray ball with no confirmation that its forthcoming UBP-XB800 disc-player supports the format. I have a suspicion that it might, as even Sony could not be that stupid.

What will these DV decks play? Well, Warner Bros, Universal and Lionsgate will be releasing software, and there shouldn't be a dearth of movies ripe for release. I'll let you in on a secret: in most cases the studio versions of titles put out in HDR 10 are down-conversions of a Dolby Vision master.

Don't forget that HDR 10 uses 10-bit colour depth and Dolby Vision a superior 12-bits. And, yes, I can see the difference. The banding in HDR 10 is irritating. Just watch the opening sequence in *The Revenant* and pay attention to the sky...

I am hearing rumours that **the reason we have not seen any UHD Blu-rays from Disney is that the House of Mouse is holding out for Dolby Vision**. So if I were Samsung or Panasonic I would sort this out and start doing a deal with Dolby, otherwise some of the choice titles that fans could expect won't be available to play on their hardware. Imagine the confusion that will create in the market.

Reference display?

Talking of Panasonic, the new reference OLED EZ1002 is truly stunning; I had a preview of it late last year and Panasonic has fixed a lot of the major issues with OLED. The biggest challenges are lost detail in near-black picture areas and green response; Panasonic has worked its magic and produced a display that very closely mirrors the Sony BVM-X300 £25,000 30in studio reference monitor. Luckily, the EZ1002 is more than twice the size of the Sony and about a fifth of the price. Panasonic has very high hopes for this display being used as a reference monitor in post-production.

As I have talked about before in this column, 3D LUT (look-up table) colour cubes are the only way to have a totally accurate calibrated screen. The EZ1002 seems to be able to have 3D profiles loaded into it via USB or SD card. I haven't yet seen a specification on the LUT capabilities in this display – 17 x 17 x 17 is now the minimum-size cube with 21 x 21 x 21 being the norm. Hopefully, Panasonic will conform to an industry standard using a known cube size.

With these displays fully-profiled they should give you the most accurate picture of any consumer TV that's not been driven by an external display LUT. The amusing thing is if every TV had LUT capabilities then they would all look the same, colour-wise; great for the viewing public eager to enjoy the 'director's intention', but I sometimes think TV manufacturers don't believe that's a good situation.

The EZ1002 goes part of the way to giving us the tools for a perfect picture. Let's hope that some of the other manufacturers take note from Panasonic's lead. Now if it only supported Dolby Vision, too... ■

*Is Dolby Vision on your wishlist? Or an HDR step too far?
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When he's not in his screening room, **Jon Thompson** tweets about Hollywood gossip, movie-making and digital mastering at [@johnnyfocal](https://twitter.com/johnnyfocal)



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Raymond Standing

What next for 3D?

I agree with Mark Craven's view that laments the dropping of 3D support from many 4K displays. It's one of the reasons I stuck with LG and bought one of its OLED65E6 models recently.

I'm not a giant fan of 3D either but still like to watch occasionally. And why not when 3D movies are still being released? And Sky Q still supports it – just.

But does the lack of support for Ultra HD 3D Blu-ray mean this is inevitably a lost war or are there any more natural forms of 3D being developed that could help revive the format?

Norman Uppard



LG's E6 OLED
– popular with
3D film fans

Make your voice heard!

Thanks for publishing my letter about 3D Blu-ray in the January edition [HCC #268]. It's good to see the magazine reflecting the different needs of all its subscribers.

You'll be pleased to know I've taken your advice and just bought the 65E5 LG OLED model and am anxiously awaiting its arrival! I'm looking forward to experiencing and comparing 4K/HDR and 3D to see which gives the best immersive experience.

It's also a good excuse to replace my aging Yamaha DSP-A1, and get a new 4K player and Sky Q, so keep up the reviews!

You'll no doubt be aware that LG, as suspected, has withdrawn 3D support from its 2017 models. You may not be aware that a petition has been started to try and change the company's mind.

It's not my petition but I'm pleased to see that it is rational and well-argued and is simply asking for one model to retain 3D capability in

Third time lucky with TFA?

Somewhat surprised to see you chose *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (the 3D edition) as your Disc of the Year [HCC #268] when it was a 'double-dip' title. Wouldn't it be better if Disney released the definitive editions first rather than treating fans like cash cows? Also, any news on when it might launch Ultra HD Blu-ray releases? Guess I'll have to buy the film for a third time when that happens!

Carl Hemmings, via email

Anton van Beek replies: To be fair to Disney, it did say early on that a 3D version of the movie would be released following the initial 2D release. Although perhaps it didn't have to hold the extras back...

Regards Ultra HD Blu-ray from Disney, all is currently quiet. But I can't see the studio staying away from the format for much longer, and its *Star Wars* flicks would be obvious titles to launch.



Did you double-dip on *The Force Awakens*?

LG's 2018 range. I gather it has been inspired by the success of the LG gamer input lag petition recently.

Only time will tell if it has any impact but it is worth a go and I'm delighted that in just a day or so it gathered over 400 signatures from within the AV/techie community.

It could do with wider circulation outside this group to the broader consumer market. Would you mind giving it a mention in the magazine please?

Chris Sedman

Mark Craven replies: Thanks for the input Raymond, Norman and Chris. The continued decline of 3D in terms of TV support is clearly the first AV hot potato of 2017!

To go through your points in order, firstly I will agree that the passive implementation of 3D has been surprisingly successful, especially with the advent of 4K displays. I've never found active 3D to be an uncomfortable experience, though, but certainly prefer the more relaxed passive vibe.

Does the absence of Ultra HD 3D Blu-ray mean the death of 3D is 'inevitable'? I wouldn't want to go out on a limb and predict that, but it's not hard to imagine film studios pulling the plug on domestic 3D releases if the hardware base is no longer there. When it comes to theatrical 3D, I can see it soldiering on, as the business model is well-established and successful.

And domestically, who knows where we'll be in five or ten years? Glasses-free 3D still remains the Holy Grail for some.

That LG (rather than Samsung or Philips or Sony) is the target of a 'bring back 3D' petition perhaps illustrates just how successful this particularly company has been in selling the format, and how well-received its 2016 OLED range has been. The petition can be found at: <https://www.change.org/p/lg-please-revive-3d-on-a-2018-oled-tv-model> – it'll be interesting to see if, and how, LG responds.

Furnish me with reviews!

There can be no doubt that your reviews together with your guides help your readers put together the best home cinema experience within their available budget. My nine-year-old Series 7 Samsung LCD TV and Denon AV receiver – purchased following your excellent reviews – have fully lived up to expectations and are still giving great service.

However, home cinema is not all about the performance of the respective equipment, is it? I am sure that for many of your readers (including me) we also have to consider how it will all look and be housed in a normally-sized family living room.

The now-common largescreen TV will probably have to stand on something, a centre speaker may need to be neatly hidden, plus of course the AVR, BD deck, set-top box, CD

★ Star Letter...

I love my new setup!

Hi. After subscribing to your mags from the late 1960s – *Hi-Fi News*, then *Home Cinema Choice* – I have relied mainly on your reviews before purchasing any gear.

So, in an article a while ago you suggested that the lounge could be made into the centre of the entertainment hub. I thought this a great idea, as if you are spending on expensive gear it is good to be able to utilise it 24/7. The journey therefore for 2016 started, with the plan of a full 7.1.4 Dolby Atmos setup!

First thing needed was a unit to take all the gear so it would not be seen. Some BDI furniture (remote friendly) fitted the bill at 1.95m, which I knew would match the width of my TV.

From hi-fi reviews I have the Tannoy D700 speakers, so to make a Tannoy front setup I bought a Tannoy TS2.12 subwoofer, plus the Tannoy Precision 6c centre.

To get the Atmos front upfiring speakers I took your advice on the KEF R50s for on top of the Tannoy D700s. (I already had in-ceiling speakers at the rear plus rears and surrounds.)

This, therefore, required more power! Your review of the Marantz AV8802a pre-amp was the start, and the power coming from a Yamaha MX-A5000 11-channel amp. For driving the D700s, though, I have kept my Pioneer stereo M90a amplifier – 200W into 8 ohms. This system now has an abundance of

smooth power on tap.

The grand finale was to choose the TV to replace my Pioneer plasma. I wrote to you regarding Samsung's flagship 88in KS9800 TV and John Archer responded. So I put this on order and finally in December it arrived. I can assure you all it is awesome, even my wife is amazed. She did have some concerns on how big it might be though, but to appease, she had the pleasure of choosing new feet-up sofas to complement the room.

I did take up Samsung's offer of a half-price UHD player until more flagship ones are released in 2017.

This is, therefore, a thank you to all your teams throughout the years and wishing you all a very happy 2017. It has been a great journey.

Brian Langford

Mark Craven replies: Thanks for the kind words Brian – enjoy your system!

Star letter-writer Brian grabs the John Carpenter films *Vampires* and *Ghosts of Mars* on Blu-ray to enjoy on his home cinema setup. Available to buy now courtesy of Powerhouse Films' Indicator label, these two dual-format discs come loaded with bonus goodies including director's commentaries, isolated scores, behind-the-scenes footage, and a rare two-part 1994 *Guardian* interview with the filmmaker discussing his career.



Samsung's 88in 4K TV takes pride of place

player, etc, all need to be smartly housed. Such housing will need to support the weight of all of the above, and adequate ventilation must be provided together with provision for neat cable runs. It must allow remote control functionality, and be moved easily to allow connecting and updating of equipment.

So for those of us who love home cinema would it be possible for you to review TV

cabinets capable of supporting large TVs and all associated equipment that will fit into a normal living room?

Brian Davey

Mark Craven replies: We're always on the lookout for suitable AV furniture to feature in the mag, but typically include it in our Bulletin news section rather than run actual reviews. >

But we've taken your comments onboard and will consider a roundup of appropriate kit.

I'd also be interested in hearing from other HCC readers regarding how they house and manage all their gear. The trend towards 65in TVs seems to be leading towards wider, yet lower, AV furniture, removing the amount of space available for racking gear. The shrinkage of set-top boxes and consoles certainly helps in this regard, but most AV receivers have stayed the same height...

Cutting the Atmos cord

I can't help but feel that manufacturers of Atmos-enabled receivers are missing a trick.

Like most homes my lounge is my only cinema. I have a very understanding wife, bless her, but I know that if I suggested putting four speakers on the ceiling together with all the cabling she'd have a fit and the same applies to floorstanding upfiring as well. Think of the possible problems of them getting knocked about by the vacuum cleaner, for example.

I think I might get away with the speakers and a thin power cable but certainly not heavy speaker cables, too.

Therefore, given that these speakers are not so reliant on an incredible sound, why not transmit to them by Bluetooth, now much improved, or Wi-Fi from the receiver? It kind of



Philips' B5 uses battery-powered rear speakers

seems obvious to me that this facility would greatly enlarge the take up of their products. Maybe there's an opening for an after-market bit of kit here as well?

Chris Bunch

Richard Stevenson replies: Ah, the great wireless challenge. Ever since the dawn of time (or 2005-ish) people have been asking for wireless home cinema speakers. And with Atmos it would be even more useful.

The main issue is that wireless speakers require a local power supply to work. Transmitting over Bluetooth or Wi-Fi to on/in-ceiling models would solve one problem, but those speakers would need hooking into the mains to power their drivers. So you're replacing one cable with another.

Philips, for one, has launched wireless battery-powered speakers (as seen in its Fidelio B5 soundbar), but these need recharging from time to time. So you'd need to get those speakers off the ceiling occasionally. Such a solution could work better with upfiring models, I suppose, but as these will normally be on-top of existing wired speakers, the extra speaker cable run doesn't seem like such a big drag ■

Contact us...

Write to HCC, AV Tech Media Ltd, Suite 25, Eden House, Enterprise Way, Edenbridge, Kent, TN8 6HF, or email us at letters@homecinemachoice.com. Please note: we cannot guarantee to print/answer all the letters we receive. Sorry.

WIN! Great Blu-rays up for grabs...

Just email your answer to Competitions@homecinemachoice.com to be in with a chance to win



Beyond the Gates

Following a well-received run on the festival circuit, this nostalgic tribute to 1980s horror films is available on digital from February 13, followed by a DVD on February 20. Thanks to Signature Entertainment we've got five DVD copies up for grabs.

Question:

Genre icon Barbara Crampton starred in which of these '80s horror classics?

Answer:

- A)** *The Evil Dead* **B)** *Re-Animator*
C) *A Nightmare on Elm Street*

Email your answer with 'Beyond the Gates' as the subject heading – and don't forget to include your postal address!



Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia

Warren Oates stars in this brutal yet beautiful film about a piano player who gets caught up in the hunt for a man with a \$1m price on his head. Arrow Video's stunning new 4K restoration of *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* is out now on Blu-ray and we've got four copies to be won!

Question:

Which legendary Western filmmaker directed *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*?

Answer:

- A)** Sam Peckinpah **B)** Clint Eastwood
C) Sergio Leone

Email your answer with 'Alfredo Garcia' as the subject heading – and don't forget to include your postal address!



Captain Fantastic

Take a walk on the wild side with this heart-warming story of family, love and growing up in the most unconventional lifestyle imaginable. The brilliant *Captain Fantastic* is out now on Digital Download, DVD and BD – and thanks to Entertainment One, we've got five Blu-rays to give away.

Question:

Who did *Captain Fantastic* actor Viggo Mortensen play in *The Lord of the Rings*?

Answer:

- A)** Aragorn **B)** Gandalf the Grey
C) Frodo

Email your answer with 'Captain Fantastic' as the subject heading – and don't forget to include your postal address!

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- Comp winners' info available on request.
- The closing date is March 3, 2017.

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Certified: AV-Holic!

HCC reader **Gary** has refitted his traditional living room to create a luxurious six-seat cinema with Dolby Atmos audio and laser-guided projection. Time to take a nosey around and be first in line for one of those chaise longues...



Welcome to the AV-Holics Hall of Fame! Introduce yourself...

Hi, I'm Gary. I'm 37 years old and I'm a director of a training and recruitment company.

How long have you been into home cinema – and what was the first setup you had?

I've been into home cinema since I was a kid. My dad always had an interest in it, he was always the first to have the latest VHS deck with a NICAM stereo player. He then upgraded to a DVD player with a few speakers around the house. Ever since then I took an interest. My first real setup was in my bedroom while

I still lived at home with my parents, which was a Toshiba 36ZP18P CRT TV and Sony DAV-SR2 all-in-one home cinema system. Looking back now I can't believe how big the TV was, it took up so much space! I thought the DAV sounded fantastic, so it was an ideal first step into home cinema.

When and why did you make the decision to set up your current cinema room?

I've always dreamed of having my own dedicated cinema – I would always look through your magazine at them but I didn't have the space available to carry it out.

Then, about a year-and-a-half ago, we moved home, which gave me the extra space I was looking for. One of the main criteria while house-hunting was finding somewhere

that had the potential to have a room I could use for the cinema.

Whereabouts in your house is the cinema? Did the room used to be used for anything else?

It's situated in the old living room. I had the whole room gutted and redesigned.

It's a great-looking space – did you get help from friends or professionals?

Yes, I employed a local electrical firm to install the lighting system and to run all the cabling – they also hooked the system up. I also employed a joiner to build the viewing area for the second level of seating. I contributed to the build by making cups of tea and doing the odd bait run.

What was the hardest part of the build, and is there anything you would do differently?

There wasn't anything really hard about the build apart from where I was going to locate the rack and all the kit – luckily I had a cupboard which backed onto the room which we could use.

If I was to do the overhaul again I would look to add some form of soundproofing to the room. With the kit I've got it can get quite loud in the rooms above! I'd also relocate where I house the kit rack as it's a tight squeeze for all the equipment.

What kit do you have in the system at the moment?

I'm using an Epson EH-LS10000 laser projector and a Screen Excellence 133in screen, 16:9 aspect ratio, with acoustically transparent material.

My front speakers are M&K Sound IW-150s, the rear and side speakers are M&K M-4Ts. I also have four ceiling speakers (M&K IW-85s) for Dolby Atmos. With the two JL Audio E-Sub 10 subwoofers, it adds up to a 7.2.4 system.

In the kit rack is a Marantz AV8802A processor; Marantz power amps; Pioneer BDP-LX58 Blu-ray player; Sky+ box; Sony PlayStation 4; and an Xbox One.

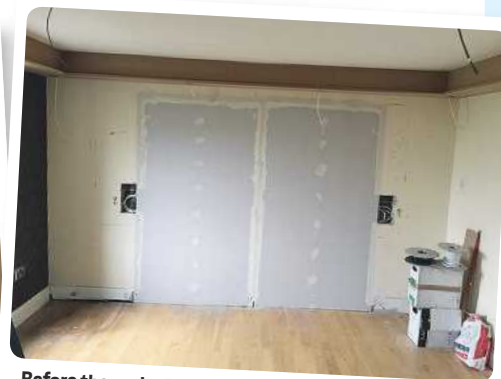
All of this hardware is controlled by a Harmony remote.

How much have you spent on the room/hardware so far?

I have spent around £27,000 on the whole build and equipment.



During the build process, Gary added a ceiling pelmet around the perimeter of the room to house downlighters and uplighters



Before the projector screen could be fitted, French windows had to be removed and the space blocked up; an extension was built on the other side

What do you love the most about having a dedicated cinema room?

It is my absolute pride and joy, I spend as much time as possible in there. There is nothing better on a cold dark night than powering the system up and kicking back to watch a movie with the family. Sundays are also great viewing. I stick on *Super Sunday*, followed by the NFL.

And what's your favourite bit of kit?

My favourite at the moment is the Epson projector. The image it produces is stunning, not only when I'm watching a Blu-ray but also when I watch Sky TV.

What's next on your wishlist?

I'm currently holding back on upgrading at the

moment as I'm really happy with the setup I have.

Where is the seating from?

The front leather seats are from Furniture Village. They are actually two chaise end units with a centre console (Elixir range). The rear seating is a large four-seater sofa from Next. The *Star Wars* cushions are from the Disney Store.

What do friends and family think of the cinema room?

They all think it's fantastic. They can't believe how good it looks, and once it's set up and in full flow they all say it's better than going to the cinema.



The 16:9 ratio screen provides the ideal canvas for both film and sports viewing



I've just started to have monthly lads' movie nights as it's great to enjoy the experience with them.

What's your opinion on Dolby Atmos/DTS:X?

When I first heard it showcased in a demo room I was taken aback by how immersive it sounded. I just wished that all new Blu-ray releases had it. *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* and *Avengers* are a must for Atmos/DTS:X. I'm sure, though, it will be the norm in the future.

What discs do you use to show off the system?

I like to use *John Wick* as the Red Circle nightclub scene is great to showcase Dolby Atmos, plus *Mission Impossible: Rogue Nation* and the motorbike chase scene. *Lone Survivor*

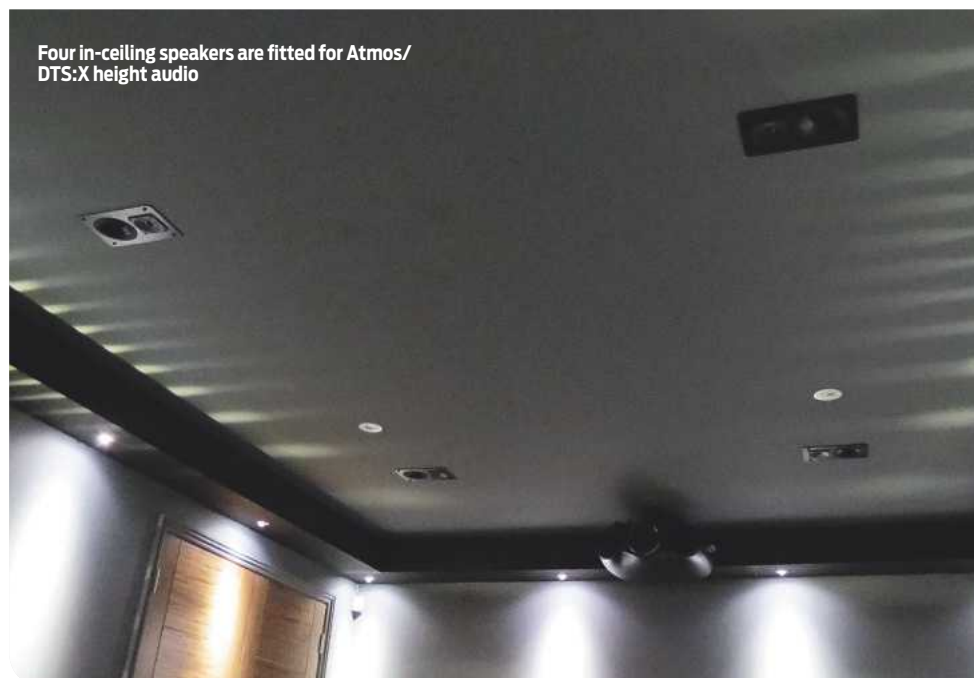
is another favourite to use when they're ambushed and the shootout starts.

What are your favourite films?

I'm a really big *Star Wars* fan so I have to choose all of the *Star Wars* movies, plus *The Matrix*, *The Wolf of Wall Street* and *Interstellar*. There are so many more I could pick as I love movies!

Lastly, are you planning to upgrade to 4K?

I don't think I need to make the jump to 4K/HDR right now as, from what I've seen, the difference it would make wouldn't be significant enough for me to invest in a new player and projector. Once I'm happy that there will be a significant improvement I'll most definitely upgrade. But I'm content with what I have right now ■



Four in-ceiling speakers are fitted for Atmos/DTS:X height audio



Creating top-quality upscaled 4K images is Epson's EH-LS10000 laser projector (top)



M&K Sound M-4T tripole speakers are mounted on-wall (above) for the surround and rear channels

Below: The room uses a pair of 10in JL Audio E-Subs



Share your system in the mag!

If you want to be in **HCC**, you'll need to send us some hi-res images of your cinema room. Here are a few tips for great-looking pictures:

1. Go big. Set your camera to take images at the largest possible size, and at the highest resolution. Don't worry about cropping or resizing – we will make them print-ready.
2. Get in focus. Make sure your photos are as sharp and clear as possible. If you have one, use a tripod, or place your camera on a flat, steady surface and take pictures on a delay. The sharper they are, the bigger we can print them.
3. Let some light in. While we tend to watch

movies in the dark, our cinema systems look their best when they are lit. If you can shoot with natural daylight, do so. If your room doesn't get a lot of light (a garage conversion, for instance) then switch on whatever lights are fitted. Avoid using flash wherever possible.

4. Be thorough. Send photos of as much of the room as possible. Images of both the front and back of the room, the kit rack, speakers, seating, disc shelf, movie poster art... The more the merrier.

5. Don't be shy. Send a picture of yourself!
6. Show us more. Got pictures of your room before it was a cinema? Or snaps of work being done? We love to see these, too.

Email your selection of images to letters@homecinemachoice.com with the subject heading 'AV-Holic'. Provide us with some information about your setup – including a full kit list – and we'll then be in touch.

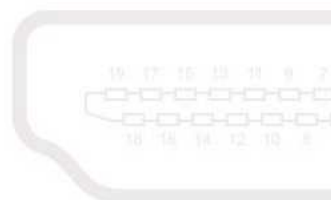




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PLAYBACK

→ **SOFTWARE HIGHLIGHTS** **DEEPWATER HORIZON** An awesome Atmos mix ensures this disc is no disaster **DON'T BREATHE** Home invasion thriller will leave you breathless **SAUSAGE PARTY** Adults-only animated comedy is a tasty HD treat **BLAIR WITCH** '...you're in for a big surprise...' **HIS GIRL FRIDAY** Screwball classic restored on Blu-ray & MORE!

Top of the comedy pops?

Popstar: Never Stop Never Stopping → Universal Pictures → All-region BD



Andy Samberg's music industry mockumentary *Popstar: Never Stop Never Stopping* delivers plenty of big laughs, but is it worth making a song and dance about on Blu-ray? Head over to p100 to see if it would crack our home cinema top ten...

HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★
Acceptable	★★★
Disappointing	★★
Dire	★

All prices quoted are approximate and may have changed

Mark soon regretted eating that sixth spicy burrito...



New heights in audio quality

An astonishing Atmos audio mix puts you in the heart of the action in Peter Berg's disaster film



→ DEEPWATER HORIZON

Based on the April 20, 2010, oil rig explosion that cost the lives of 11 men and caused the biggest ecological disaster in US history, *Deepwater Horizon* is a bruising piece of disaster cinema that brings the incident to life in adrenaline-pumping fashion.

The film dramatises the events from the point of view of the rig's chief electronics technician Mike Williams (Mark Wahlberg), his superior Jimmy Harrell (Kurt Russell) and navigation officer Andrea Fleytas (Gina Rodriguez). Trouble starts when they begin their latest shift on the rig only to learn that a crucial stability test has not been carried out on the drilling well. A tense meeting with resident BP liaison Donald Valdrine (John Malkovich) makes it clear the gas company is cutting corners in order to get the rig up and running as quickly as possible. And it isn't long before things go very badly wrong...

While it may be based on a true story, *Deepwater Horizon* has 'popcorn blockbuster' running through its DNA. As such, whatever it may lack in nuance (Malkovich's character is just as hiss-able as any pantomime villain) it makes up for with its ability to transport the viewer into the heart of the chaos. And what chaos it is. Filmed on a 85 per cent scale recreation of the rig, *Deepwater Horizon* has a sense of verisimilitude that something like *San Andreas* could never hope to capture. When the explosions start, it's impossible not to think that this is exactly what it would have looked and sounded like at the time. Thankfully, you'll be parked on your sofa.

Picture: Shot with Arri Alexa cameras, *Deepwater Horizon* arrives on Blu-ray with an excellent AVC-encoded 2.40:1 1080p transfer of some pretty tricky source material.

The sheer amount of muck and debris being thrown around in the film's second act would be enough to derail a lesser encode, but Lionsgate's disc takes it all in its stride, regularly filling the screen with finely rendered details. As night falls in the film, black levels are pushed to the limit too, contrasting extremely well with the bright yellows, oranges and reds of the inferno that envelops the rig.

Lionsgate is also releasing the film on 4K Blu-ray in the UK on January 30, but couldn't provide us with a copy in time to be included in this issue.

Audio: As good as the picture quality is, the audio is even better. Indeed, *Deepwater Horizon*'s Dolby Atmos mix is one of the most engrossing tracks we've heard in a long time. Right from the off there's an immersive feel to the audio (check out the way dialogue is deliberately drowned out by the helicopters as the crew arrives at the rig in Chapter 3) and it gets bigger and more explosive from Chapter 9 onwards. Spatial effects are perfectly positioned, LFE has a real physical presence and there's a massive sense of scale to the presentation.

Extras: *Beyond the Horizon* is a 51-minute collection of featurettes focusing mainly – but not exclusively – on the principal cast. Also included are separate featurettes about director Peter Berg (18 minutes) and the recreation of the rig (27 minutes), plus a dozen behind-the-scenes clips.

HCC VERDICT

Deepwater Horizon

→ Lionsgate → Region B BD
→ £25

WE SAY: A gripping true-life disaster flick made even more thrilling on Blu-ray via superb Dolby Atmos audio and slick visuals.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

War Dogs

Warner Bros. → All-region BD
£25



Based on the true story of two young friends (played by Miles Teller and Jonah Hill) who won a \$300m contract to supply arms to the Afghan military, *War Dogs* clearly wants to be the *Wolf of Wall Street* of arms dealing films. However, director Todd Phillips is no Martin Scorsese and the characters here aren't sympathetic enough for you to really care about the outcome. A shame, as *War Dogs* does highlight some genuine concerns about the shady nature of the gun business. While the disc's extras are rather bland, the 1080p visuals and DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio are first-rate.



Anthropoid

Icon Home Entertainment
Region B BD → £20



Another true-story flick, this time a tense World War II thriller following two Czechoslovakian operatives who were sent to Nazi-occupied Prague in 1941 to assassinate high-ranking S.S. officer – and architect of The Final Solution – Reinhard Heydrich. Curiously, *Anthropoid* was shot on Super 16mm film and the HD platter reflects this with a grainy 2.40:1 1080p encode. While the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix doesn't have too much to do early on, it explodes into life during the church siege finale. A 29-min *Making of...* and three storyboard comparison are included.



Hell or High Water

StudioCanal → Region B BD
£23



This excellent neo-western stars Chris Pine and Ben Foster as a divorced dad and his ex-con brother who rob banks to raise the money to save their ranch, while Jeff Bridges and Gil Birmingham play the cops out to stop them. Smart, thrilling and amusing, the film's biggest success comes from its ability to make you root for both pairs of protagonists – even though you know that it's not going to work out for one of them. This Blu-ray's stunning 2.40:1 Full HD encode captures the dusty landscapes perfectly, while the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix is pleasingly punchy. Insightful extras include four featurettes and a Q&A.



Tense thriller plays a blinder

Predator and prey go head-to-head in this home invasion flick, but which is which?

→ DON'T BREATHE

Three resourceful young crooks – Alex (Dylan Minnette), Rocky (Jane Levy) and Money (Daniel Zovatto) – get more than they bargained for when they target the home of a blind war veteran (Stephen Lang), who is rumoured to have hundreds of thousands of dollars stashed away. When the trio break in, they soon discover that money isn't all he has hidden in the house, and that blindness isn't such a disability for this former soldier.

Having made a splash with his ultra-violent 2013 remake of *The Evil Dead*, director Fede Alvarez transitions from stomach-churning gore to heart-stopping tension with this accomplished home invasion thriller. Unusually for the genre, *Don't Breathe* asks you to side with the invaders rather than the victim; Stephen Lang's terrifying performance is partially responsible for its success in this regard. Credit is also due to Alvarez's dab hand at cranking up the sense of terror as the trio try to creep around silently, so as not to draw the attention of a man hunting them by sound.

Clocking in at a little over 90 minutes, *Don't Breathe* is as propulsive as it is imaginative, barely giving you the chance to draw a breath between its tense cat-and-mouse set-pieces. It may not do anything particularly original, but it nails its premise extraordinarily well – and following on from his *Evil Dead*, it marks Alvarez out as one of the most exciting genre talents around.

Picture: Set primarily inside a dimly-lit house at night, *Don't Breathe* is a pretty dark film. Even so, the Blu-ray's 2.40:1-framed 1080p encode is very



Fancy a game of blind man's bluff?

good. The palette inside the house often leans towards sickly shades of green or yellow, but other patches of colour are still accurately conveyed. There's plenty of detail on display, even in shadows, plus sharp delineation, and the all-important black levels are wonderfully deep.

Audio: The subject matter means *Don't Breathe*'s DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack has an important part to play, and it works very well. There's a palpable 360-degree soundstage on offer, with rousing dynamic peaks and low-level impact. Spatial cues are well positioned and effects pan seamlessly.

Extras: Alvarez joins co-writer Rodo Sayagues and actor Stephen Lang for an extremely informative audio commentary. Further production details can be found in the disc's short videos covering the visual style, cast, set design and score. Alvarez also provides an optional solo chat-track for the disc's eight deleted scenes.



HCC VERDICT

Don't Breathe

→ Sony Pictures → All-region BD
→ £25

WE SAY: A must-see thriller with a DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix that will leave you breathless with excitement.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

Arcade Action

Bigscreen home entertainment isn't just about movies anymore. **Rik Henderson** checks out a videogame vying for time on your home cinema system...



Watch_Dogs 2

Ubisoft → PS4, Xbox One, Windows PC → £50

Watch_Dogs was originally heralded as the first truly next-generation game when it was previewed ahead of the PS4 and Xbox One hitting the shelves. However, the final release never really lived up to its ambition. This sequel is far better though, taking the same idea of being able to hack electronics while walking around a vast open city, but enhancing it in almost every way.

Setting the game in San Francisco helps, adding colour to an open-world, go-anywhere environment, and introducing a younger cast of antagonists makes it fit better with the *Mr. Robot* ideology. Indeed, much is borrowed from the USA Network show – hosted by Amazon Video in the UK – which is no bad thing.

The new game has a distinct sense of humour too, which was lacking before. It satirises the powerful tech companies of today, such as Google (Nudle) and Apple (Blume), with the latter very much being the enemy of the piece.

Gameplay manifests itself in many ways. In true *GTA* style this open-world game has cars and motorbikes to drive from A-to-B, hardcore weaponry to gun down opponents, and side missions to complete. But it also throws in puzzles and stealth play, plus some unique features that arise from the fact that your character can hack any piece of kit, including every denizen of the virtual world, whether they are important to the plot or not.

Sometimes this throws up new side missions, other times it just gives you cash that you can use to buy better weapons or tech to help solve later situations, such as remote-controlled vehicles and drones for you to employ.

This serves to add something different to the mix, helping expand the title beyond being a mere *GTA* clone, even providing multiple ways to complete the same main missions.

In terms of visuals, PC owners get the best deal with 4K playout, often running at 60fps if your computer is good enough. An upscaled version is available for PS4 Pro owners too, who get 1800p out of their machines, although you'd be hard pushed to really tell the difference.



Outcast: Season One

Twentieth Century Fox → Region B BD
£35



Based on a 2014 comic book by *The Walking Dead* creator Robert Kirkman, this intense series deals with another type of horror: demonic possession.

While the 'exorcism-of-the-week' template that dominates the first few episodes can get a little tiresome, *Outcast* is worth sticking with as it steadily builds towards something bigger and far more satisfying. This three-disc BD release possesses suitably gloomy, if sharply delineated, 1.78:1 Full HD video and atmospheric DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio. Modest extras include 10 short *Making of...* vignettes.



Agent Carter: The Complete Second Season

Walt Disney → All-region BD
£28



Special agent Peggy Carter (Hayley Atwell) heads to L.A. in this enjoyable second and final outing for the frustratingly short-lived Marvel TV series.

Still, at least *Agent Carter* got

to go out on a high, matching the first season for knockabout comedy and spy heroics, while also cooking up a formidable supervillain for Peggy to match wits with (Wynn Everett's fascinating Whitney Frost). This Blu-ray release spreads the final season's 10 episodes across two HD platters, each delivering a mix of colourful 1.78:1 encodes and engaging DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtracks. The sole extra is a blooper reel.



Five Element Ninjas

88 Asia → Region B BD & R2 DVD
£15



An honourable Chinese martial arts school battles an army of nasty Japanese ninjas in this 1982 Hong Kong action flick. Offering up a winning mixture of gorgeous fight choreography

and cartoonish gore, *Five Element Ninjas* is proof that when it comes to this sort of film, coherent storytelling is less important than the type of fight scene that ends with one combatant tripping on his own spilled intestines. This BD makes the most of the lurid visuals with a colourful 2.35:1 Full HD encode, while genre expert Bey Logan provides a fact-packed commentary.





A feast of animated filth

Seth Rogen's gut-busting adults-only 'toon is sure to have you coming back for seconds

→ SAUSAGE PARTY

The food items filling the shelves of Shopwell's supermarket spend their days singing the praises of their 'gods' and eagerly awaiting the moment when they too will be swept up by one of them, put in a basket and taken off to the 'Great Beyond'.

However, when one of the 'gods' returns a bottle of honey mustard, the traumatised sauce can only hint at the horrors he witnessed, before jumping out of a shopping cart and committing suicide. In the ensuing chaos, hotdog Frank (Seth Rogen) sets off across the supermarket to discover the truth, much to the annoyance of his bun girlfriend Brenda (Kristen Wigg). And if that wasn't enough of a challenge, Frank must also avoid a demented douche (Nick Kroll) who blames him for its damaged condition.

This CG 'toon is definitely not suitable for little nippers. The brainchild of Rogen and Evan Goldberg, *Sausage Party* has the same filthy mind and dirty mouth as their previous live-action efforts (*Superbad*, *This is the End*, etc). However, here it's employed to offer a critique of intolerance, blind faith and organised religion; providing a little food for thought, if you like.

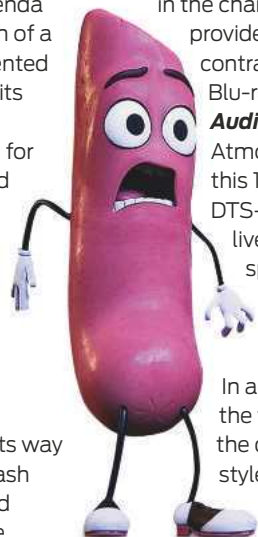
Sure, it's rude, crude and goes out of its way to shock. But, whether it's the Arabic lavash bread who believes that his Great Beyond involves 77 bottles of virgin olive oil or the

bottle of German sauerkraut who sings about 'exterminating the juice', *Sausage Party* is an equal opportunities offender that happens to be very, very funny.

Picture: While the animation itself doesn't quite measure up to that produced by the likes of Pixar and DreamWorks, *Sausage Party* still looks pretty terrific on Blu-ray. Unsurprisingly, the colour palette is one of the 2.40:1 encode's strongest aspects, with the packaging that dresses the film's cast of foodstuffs offering up plenty of vibrant primaries. The 1080p imagery also displays plenty of texture, certainly as much as is present in the character models, while strong black levels provide a solid starting point for a pleasing contrast punch. There's also a 4K Ultra HD Blu-ray version available.

Audio: With Sony Pictures still making Dolby Atmos mixes exclusive to its 4K Blu-rays, this 1080p platter makes do with a regular DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack. It's still a pretty lively affair that keeps the front and rear speakers busy with big musical numbers and sweeping atmospherics.

Extras: There's not much to chew on when it comes to *Sausage Party*'s extras. In addition to brief featurettes concerning the film's origin, dialogue recording and score, the disc also serves up a spoof Walt Disney-style promo, a vintage chat with Rogen and Goldberg about the art of the pitch, alternate line readings and a gag reel.



These crazy supermarket foodstuffs are clearly off their trolley...



HCC VERDICT

Sausage Party

→ Sony Pictures → All-region BD → £25

WE SAY: A feast of filthy fun on a tasty hi-def platter, although buyers of the Ultra HD version will get a more immersive soundmix.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★



'To a dog, dog food is just food'

All-singing, all-dancing, all-swearing music comedy pulls out the stops on Blu-ray

→ POPSTAR: NEVER STOP NEVER STOPPING

The three members of US comedy troupe/comic songwriters The Lonely Island star, write and direct this generally sharp and witty satire of the modern music industry. Think *This Is Spinal Tap* for the YouTube generation.

Andy Samberg hogs screentime as pop culture superstar Conner4Real, formerly a member of a three-piece boyband; of the other two, one is now his loyal DJ and the other has retreated to a Colorado dirt-farm after a fall out. Across 90-odd minutes of mockumentary, we see Conner's career come crashing down around him after a disastrous album launch – can he re-team with his old chums for a triumphant return?

With the every-scene-must-be-funny attitude of modern US comedies (Judd Apatow is a producer), *Popstar...* naturally has some clunky moments where jokes fall flat, and more space should have been given to allow its rise, fall, rise narrative to really succeed. Additionally, you'll need to be fairly *au fait* with the world of modern American pop to recognise every cameo and understand every gag. But when it works, this flick can be ruthlessly funny, particularly when it comes to throw-away flights of fancy (crooner Seal being mauled by wolves, a giant bee attack) and the all-important original songs, which are too profane for us to recount here. Flawed, but fun.

Picture: The documentary stylings mean *Popstar...* mixes 4:3 home video footage, concert tapes and YouTube uploads with more traditional 2.40:1 visuals, leading to deliberately varying levels of



sharpness, but overall this is a crisp, stable hi-def presentation, with a rich contrast and colours that, er, never stop popping.

Audio: The DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundmix naturally gets the most to do when it comes to the concert sequences, which are lively, bass-rich and immersive. Yet that's not to say the track remains front-heavy elsewhere; there's attention to detail present in the surrounds. The standout audio moment, though, is DJ Owen's laser hat, which erupts with a sound effect lifted straight from Spielberg's *War of the Worlds*.

Extras: Those who can't get enough of the original songs will appreciate the six-strong suite of music videos. Another go-to extra is the commentary track from Samberg and co-writers Jorma Taccone and Akiva Schaffer, although its knockabout nature may prove too wacky for some. Other extras include a wealth of deleted scenes, plus various mini-vids, out-takes and more.



Conner4Real is so humble he actually wrote a song about it...

HCC VERDICT

Popstar: Never Stop Never Stopping

→ Universal Pictures
→ All-region BD → £20

WE SAY: Frequently hilarious and offensive pop music mockumentary gets an upbeat BD release.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

Bad Moms

Entertainment in Video → Region B BD
£20



A surprise hit at the US box office last summer, this raucous comedy from the writers of *The Hangover* stars Mila

Kunis as an exhausted mother who joins forces with two other over-stressed parents (Kristen Bell and Kathryn Hahn) to cut loose and have a little fun. This sweetly subversive chuckle-fest lands on Blu-ray with a colourful yet oddly diffuse 2.40:1 Full HD encode that is a touch lacking in clarity. The accompanying DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack is technically sound, if understandably front-heavy. Bonuses include deleted scenes and interviews with the stars and their moms.



Bridget Jones's Baby

Universal Pictures → All-region BD
£25



It's been 15 years since Helen Fielding's neurotic everywoman first hit the bigscreen. However, while the real

world has changed a lot during that time, the world of Bridget Jones hasn't and this tired three-quel feels like a leftover from another era – especially when compared to current TV shows like *Catastrophe* and *Fleabag*. The fact that the film isn't funny doesn't help matters either. But what about the Blu-ray? While the DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio is pretty flat, the 2.40:1 video is bright and colourful. Extras include five featurettes, a gag reel and an alternate ending.



Captain Fantastic

Entertainment One → Region B BD
£25



While there's a certain level of wish fulfilment to its depiction of outdoor living, this quirky tale

of a family that made a home in the forests of the Pacific Northwest, then tries to assimilate back into society, still offers a perceptive account of fatherhood and family life. Shot digitally, *Captain Fantastic* has an attractive 2.40:1 Full HD encode. Meanwhile, an involving DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix generates convincing atmospherics (such as the thunder rolling around you in Chapter 4). Disappointingly, a four-minute *Making of...* is the sole extra.



Absolutely Fabulous: The Movie

Twentieth Century Fox → Region B BD
£25



Falling back on the old trick of heading abroad in an attempt at justifying the jump

to the bigscreen, this wretched cinematic follow-up to the hit BBC sitcom quickly reveals itself to be just as out-of-touch as Edina and Patsy with its tired gags and parade of daytime TV-quality cameos (Lulu! Biggles! Emma Bunton!). If you ask us, it's less *Absolutely Fabulous*, more *Absolutely Awful*. Still, for what it's worth, this Blu-ray release holds up well from an AV standpoint and hosts a reasonable selection of extras, including nine promo featurettes.





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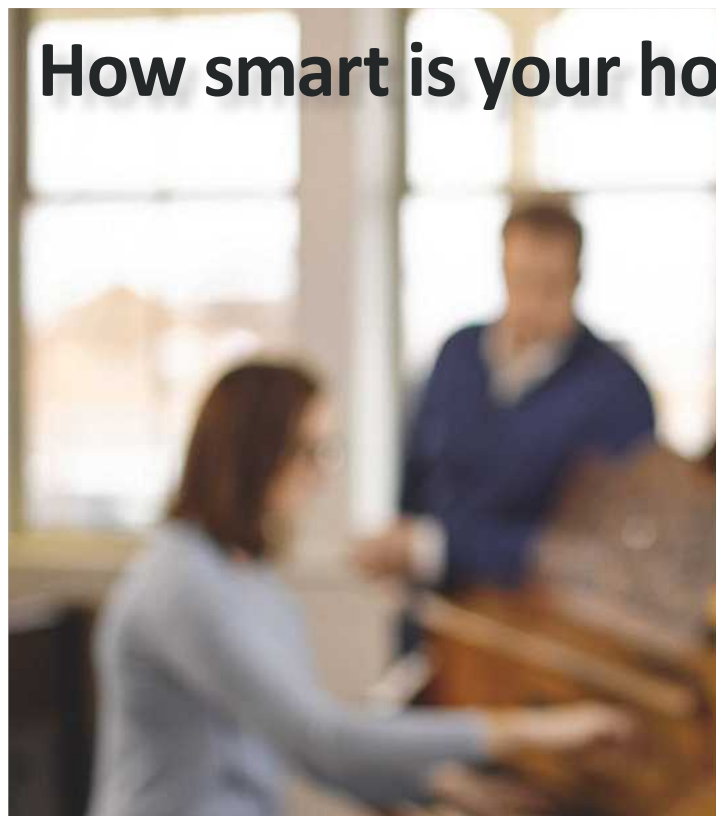
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Walter refused to accept that nobody wanted his spare Coldplay ticket



DISC OF THE MONTH

A truly newsworthy release!

Stop the presses! This sizzling screwball comedy has become 2017's first 'must-own' Blu-ray

→ HIS GIRL FRIDAY

This cracking screwball comedy stars Rosalind Russell as ace reporter 'Hildy' Johnson, who turns up at the offices of *The Morning Post* one morning to tell her managing editor and ex-husband Walter Burns (Cary Grant) that she is quitting to remarry and live a quite life in Albany. Never one to let a good thing go, the conniving Burns sets about sabotaging Hildy's relationship by giving her the one thing he's sure she can't resist: a big story.

His Girl Friday was Hollywood's second bigscreen adaptation of the influential 1928 play *The Front Page*, by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur. However, rather than shoot a straight-ahead film version of the play, director Howard Hawks cannily opted to switch the gender of the reporter from male to female, transforming a battle of wills into a sophisticated and sassy battle of the sexes.

As well as being one of the funniest films ever made, *His Girl Friday* is also one of the fastest. Every arch line of dialogue is sprayed across the screen like bullets from a machine gun. Indeed, while the original publicity of 1940 boasted of speeches running at 240 words per minute, studies have revealed that some in the film actually clock in at over 300 words per minute – which is twice the rate of the conversations you have down the pub.

If this all sounds a bit relentless and unyielding, it also means that *His Girl Friday* probably boasts the highest laugh-to-minute ratio in cinema history. And what more could you ask of any comedy?



Howard Hawks encouraged his cast to ad-lib and step on each others' lines

Picture: According to the liner notes that accompany Criterion's Blu-ray, this high-definition digital transfer of *His Girl Friday* was created using a new '35mm fine-grain master positive, made from the nitrate original camera negative'. The subsequent clean-up was supervised by restoration maestro Grover Crisp and UCLA Film & TV Archive preservation expert Bob Gitt.

Given the care involved, it's hardly surprising that the AVC-encoded 1.33:1 1080p image represents a marked improvement on the previous DVD release. The amount of detail on show results in a pleasingly textured and extremely film-like image, there's authentic grain, and black levels are suitably deep.

Audio: The disc's LPCM 1.0 mono soundtrack does the best it can dealing with the limitations and complications of the source material. Given the overlapping nature of the dialogue, you can hardly fault this Blu-ray when the odd word gets lost in the mix. More tellingly, there are no instances of cracks, pops and other age-related problems.

Extras: This two-disc set plays home to plenty of excellent extras. Accompanying *His Girl Friday* on the first platter are archival audio interviews with Howard Hawks; four archival featurettes; two trailers; a 1940 radio adaptation; and an appreciation of the film by film scholar David Bordwell.

However, it's the second disc that makes this set truly special. Here you'll find a wonderful new 4K restoration of the original 1931 film adaptation of *The Front Page*, plus a detailed account of the restoration process, and two more radio plays.

HCC VERDICT

His Girl Friday

→ Criterion Collection → Region B BD
→ £28

WE SAY: Criterion has done Howard Hawks' classic comedy justice with this outstanding Blu-ray release

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

Rupture

Signature → All-region BD
£20



This muddled sci-fi thriller stars Noomi Rapace as a divorced mother who is drugged, kidnapped and locked

up in a mysterious medical facility where she is subjected to a series of traumatic experiments. Sadly, despite an intriguing setup and the best efforts of a solid cast (which also includes Michael Chiklis, Peter Stormare and Lesley Manville) *Rupture* is stuck with a script that fails to pay off its story in a satisfactory manner. Although this UK platter is devoid of extras, it fares well from an AV standpoint due to its richly saturated 2.40:1 Full HD transfer and bass-heavy DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix.



The Burning

Arrow Video → Region B BD & R2 DVD
£20



Hitting cinemas in 1981 at the height of the slasher movie boom, this former Video Nasty remains one of the

best examples of this horror sub-genre. Packed with unforgettable gore gags (courtesy of the legendary Tom Savini) and plenty of 'before-they-were-famous' faces among the young cast (Jason Alexander! Holly Hunter!), *The Burning* is a blast from start to finish and even more effective than the original *Friday the 13th*. Arrow's Blu-ray features a crisp and colourful uncut Full HD presentation of the film, plus a tasty array of extras topped by three audio commentaries.



Happy Birthday to Me

Indicator → All-region BD & R2 DVD → £23



Boasting what must surely be cinema's only death by kebab, this enjoyably bonkers 1981 Canadian slasher from

Hollywood veteran J. Lee Thompson is bound to get a warm welcome from horror fans discovering it for the first time. This UK Blu-ray release makes the experience all the more satisfying with detailed 1080p video and robust audio (in a choice of LPCM mono and DTS-HD MA 5.1 flavours). Among the extras are an alternate soundtrack (featuring a different score) and a fan commentary by The Hysteria Continues.



Howling II

Arrow Video → Region B BD & R2 DVD
£20



Fans of Christopher Lee's unshakable stoicism in the face of terrible filmmaking (plus Sybil Danning's

cleavage) are well served by this inept sequel to Joe Dante's classic werewolf flick (especially where Sybil is concerned, as a shot of her baring all is repeated some 17 times during the film's end credits...). Lovers of bad films will no doubt be chuffed to find that Arrow has put its usual amount of effort into *Howling II*, resulting in a strong 1.85:1 encode, clean LPCM mono audio and plenty of bonus bits, including two chat-tracks and four interviews.



Lost in the woods all over again

Belated found footage sequel delivers solid scares and a sensational Dolby Atmos mix

→ BLAIR WITCH

The Blair Witch Project (1999) is one of the major cinematic milestones of the past two decades. But any attempt at turning it into a franchise was killed stone dead by the diabolical *Blair Witch 2: Book of Shadows* (2000). Or so we thought...

Initially produced and promoted under the false title *The Woods*, this new *Blair Witch* from filmmaking duo Adam Wingard and Simon Barrett (of *The Guest* fame) finds four friends heading out into the Black Hills Forests in an attempt to discover what really happened all those years ago. What follows is essentially more of the same, albeit with fancy new camera equipment (including head-cams and a drone) giving it more visual dynamism.

However, while this *Blair Witch* initially feels like nothing more than a somewhat larger budget remake of the original, as the film progresses it gradually starts to take on a life of its own. Striving for any sort of documentary realism is junked in favour of Wingard and Barrett wanting to simply freak you out; something they achieve through a proliferation of jump scares and unsettling time-bending tricks before taking you back to *that* derelict house for a genuinely nerve-shredding final act.

Picture: Like its predecessor, *Blair Witch* was shot on a variety of formats (albeit all digital this time) and this leads to a 1.85:1-framed 1080p Blu-ray encode that is prone to shifts in quality depending on the source of any particular shot. For the most part the actual image resolution is generally good, although some cameras bring their own issues regarding

Sticks and stones may break my bones...



clarity and pixelisation. On top of this, further digital defects and glitches were purposefully added in post production.

Audio: If the film's image quality is something of a (deliberate) mishmash, the Dolby Atmos soundtrack is reference quality. Following a relatively low-key opening act, the first night in the forest sees the soundmix up its game as it attempts to scare the hell out of you. It's inventive and precise, with doomy dollops of LFE. From then on it rarely backs off, constantly employing every speaker – including your height channels – to delightful effect.

Extras: The filmmakers deliver a self-deprecating chat-track that discusses the film's box office failure as well as its production. Even more informative is the 107-minute *Neverending Night: The Making of Blair Witch*, which covers the entire production process in exacting detail. A tour of the house set rounds out the disc's trio of enjoyable extras.



HCC VERDICT

Blair Witch

→ Lionsgate → Region B BD
→ £25

WE SAY: This satisfying horror sequel/reboot/remake sports a scarily good Atmos mix on Blu-ray

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★



A night to remember

Spirited horror-comedy keeps fans smiling with this remastered Blu-ray

→ **FRIGHT NIGHT: LIMITED EDITION STEELBOOK**

Teenage horror fan Charley Brewster (William Ragsdale) has a problem. While his girlfriend Amy (Amanda Bearse) just wants to make out, Charlie is obsessed with spying on his hip new neighbour Jerry Dandrige (Chris Sarandon), who he is sure is actually a vampire responsible for a series of local murders. When nobody believes him, Charlie turns to ham actor and local TV horror host Peter Vincent (Roddy McDowall) for help.

Despite a handful of appealingly arty efforts like George A. Romero's *Martin* (1977) and Tony Scott's *The Hunger* (1983), the late 1970s and early 1980s were a lean time for vampire films. However, that all changed in 1985. Horror maestro Tobe Hooper's big-budget feature about sexy space vampires (*Lifeforce*) may have flopped at the box office, but debut director Tom Holland gave fang-fans something to sink their teeth into with this amusing outing that brought bloodsuckers bang up to date.

Mixing together elements from the films of Alfred Hitchcock and John Hughes with traditional genre tropes, *Fright Night* (which Holland also wrote) takes great care in navigating the fine line between humour and horror. In addition to a witty and knowing script, the film benefits immensely from some excellent performances, the standouts being McDowall's would-be Van Helsing and Sarandon's sinister and suave nocturnal killer.

Picture: Based on the same 4K restoration used by Twilight Time in the US, *Fright Night* cuts a fine figure on Blu-ray. Colours appear true, blacks are suitably



deep and grain is well resolved. It looks crisp and cinematic. Best of all, Eureka's AVC 2.35:1 1080p encode is more robust than any previous HD release of the film and suffers from none of the anomalies that were seen on those platters.

Audio: The disc offers a choice of two soundtracks: the original stereo (LPCM) and a 5.1 remix (DTS-HD Master Audio). Both exhibit excellent clarity and plenty of range, while the multichannel effort adds discrete – but effective – use of the surround channels, without being a head-turner.

Extras: There's a bountiful supply of bonus goodies here, including the vintage EPK materials (sourced from VHS), a 2008 reunion panel, an interview with Tom Holland, a memorabilia gallery and a new 146-minute(!) retrospective documentary. And don't worry if this Limited Edition Steelbook sells out, as a regular Blu-ray with all the same extras is set to follow in April.



Where's Buffy when you need her?

HCC VERDICT

Fright Night: Limited Edition Steelbook

→ Eureka → Region B BD & R2 DVD
→ £25

WE SAY: An impressive 4K remaster and oodles of extras make this the definitive *Fright Night* Blu-ray

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

Creepy

Eureka - Masters of Cinema
Region B BD & R2 DVD → £20



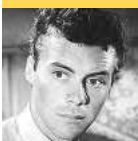
Having stepped away from the 'J-horror' genre for the past decade, this unnerving thriller sees Kiyoshi (*Pulse*) Kurosawa reclaim the mantle of Japan's leading master of menace.

Creepy stars Hidetoshi Nishijima as a former police officer now working as a teacher after a run-in with a serial killer, only to find himself pulled back in by an unsolved crime apparently linked to his neighbour. This Blu-ray's suitably gloomy 1080p encode highlights Kurosawa's use of light and shadow, while the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix is all about moody ambience. A 38-minute interview with the director rounds out the disc.



The Blue Lamp

StudioCanal → Region B BD
£23



While its relentlessly quaint view of policing makes this 1950 Ealing Studios hit look like it comes from another

world, not just another time, *The Blue Lamp* remains a solid little crime drama. The key to its success is Dirk Bogarde's brilliantly sweaty turn as the young punk who guns down lovable, long-serving copper George Dixon (Jack Warner) during a robbery at a cinema. Sure to ignite the interest of classic film fans, *The Blue Lamp* hits Blu-ray with well-restored 1.37:1 imagery and a selection of informative extras, including a chat-track and a BBC Radio 3 appraisal of the film.



The Man from Laramie

Eureka - Masters of Cinema
Region B BD & R2 DVD → £20



The last collaboration between director Anthony Mann and James Stewart, this brutal psychological

Western finds the actor cast as an army captain looking to avenge the death of his brother. *The Man from Laramie* was one of the first Westerns shot in CinemaScope and this handsome hi-def presentation really makes the most of the stunning 2.55:1 vistas and rich Technicolor palette. Meanwhile, the original four-track stereo audio has undergone effective LPCM 2.0 and DTS-HD MA 5.1 makeovers. A video essay and chat-track are also included.



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WHAT HI-FI?



Going back for another helping

All four *Hunger Games* movies on a 4K boxset? Sounds tasty

→ THE HUNGER GAMES: COMPLETE 4-FILM COLLECTION

This quartet of movies (based upon Suzanne Collins' trilogy of books) steamrolled through multiplexes between 2012 and 2015, earned studio Lionsgate a fortune and turned lead actress Jennifer Lawrence into a megastar.

A boxset binge is perhaps the best way to view, as it allows the narrative to segue into one eight-hour epic, although you'll notice how the franchise grows in confidence (and budget) as it develops.

While targeted at a teen audience, *The Hunger Games* retains a healthily dark side, and Lawrence has the screen presence to carry it all off even when it gets bogged down in its futuristic, dystopian narrative. Nor does it lack for explosive action.

Picture: *Hunger Games* fans are expected to shell out £100 on this boxset, when they might have only recently taken their 1080p copy of *Mockingjay Pt 2* out of their BD spinner. Thankfully, the 4K/HDR encodes here are pretty spiffy.

Whether based on a 2K (the first film) or 4K master, there's a clean, crisp feeling to these 2.40:1 presentations, with just a hint of film grain betraying their 35mm (in part) origins. There's still a cool nature to much of the cinematography, but incidences of brighter hues have real wide colour impact, while the expanded luminance



The GeoPhys crew from *Time Team* had new toys to play with



HCC VERDICT

The Hunger Games: Complete 4-Film Collection

→ Lionsgate Home Entertainment
→ All-region UHD/RB BD → £100

WE SAY: A bumper boxset with new Atmos mixes and pleasing 4K.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

picks out the searing heat of fireballs and the gentler glows of chandeliers and control room lights. **Audio:** The first two movies get Dolby Atmos tracks to bring them in line with the *Mockingjay* duo, and these make effective use of the original elements (previous mixes were DTS-HD 7.1, still present on the Full HD counterparts), with excellent steering and robust LFE.

Extras: Heaps of stuff here, all culled from the previous releases, and thankfully not relegated to the Full HD discs so you don't have to swap over to gorge on chat tracks and features. Not everything is replicated though, making this not a definitive set – and there's no 3D version of the final flick either.

The Secret Life Of Pets

Universal Pictures → All-region UHD BD/
All-region BD → £40



We initially didn't take to *The Secret Life Of Pets* – not least because it felt like all the best bits were in the trailer. Handily for long-suffering parents, however, repeat viewings

uncover hidden emotional and comedic depths. The 4K picture here is a disappointment. Colours enjoy more refinement but lack the joyful vibrancy of the SDR Blu-ray, while detail levels seldom look higher than those of the HD transfer. In fact, some large-scale exterior shots look softer. The Dolby Atmos mix (on both discs) features some effective and fun height details.



Star Trek Beyond

Universal Pictures → All-region UHD BD/
All-region BD → £40



Director Justin Lin brings vim and vigour to what turns out to be a good-looking *Star Trek* effort on UHD

Blu-ray. HDR expands the luminance range of the 4K transfer's dark scenes, and raises the intensity of sun-drenched exteriors and the Enterprise's displays – though J.J. Abrams' *Trek* outings both looked more dynamic. The wider colour gamut enhances uniforms and locations, and there's welcome extra detail versus the HD Blu-ray – though the 2K-rendered SFX can look relatively soft. The 1080p disc offers 2D; there's no 3D version here.



The Shallows

Sony Pictures → All-region UHD BD/
All-region BD → £30



Jaume Collet-Serra's woman-vs-massive shark thriller enjoys a seriously handsome Ultra HD Blu-ray debut.

Detail levels are unusually high for a platter that's apparently derived from a mere 2K digital master, while the film's almost supernaturally vibrant colour scheme is opened up spectacularly by the addition of HDR and WCG. There's a smoother finish to the UHD image too, which enhances your connection with the heroine's plight. Sealing the deal is an artfully crafted Atmos mix (not available on the 1080p BD) that fills your living room with water and snapping jaws.





As far back as I can remember...

...I always wanted a 4K version of this gangster masterpiece. But maybe not in HDR

→ GOODFELLAS

Martin Scorsese's *GoodFellas* is one of the director's premium creations – a frenetic, slickly-edited immersion into the life of small-time mobster Henry Hill (Ray Liotta), spanning his childhood in the 1950s up to his disappearance into the FBI's Witness Protection Programme in the 1980s. Along the way, he teams up with Robert De Niro and Joe Pesci's gangsters, marries Karen (Lorraine Bracco) and learns how to smuggle pastrami into prison. A dizzying tapestry of freeze-frames, voiceover, Rolling Stones tunes and sharp bursts of violence, *GoodFellas* was a great way for film fans to start the 1990s.

Picture: Scorsese's classic gets a UHD BD release by Warner, having previously been available in 4K via the Vudu service in the US.

When it comes to detail, this 4K/35mm scan doesn't offer that much of a step up over the previous 25th Anniversary Blu-ray, which was itself derived from the same 4K scan. The image is crisp with obvious fine detail evident throughout, but doesn't reach the eyeball-searing levels of clarity that some will have hoped for. At the same time, it retains a pleasing grain structure and celluloid feel. As regards HDR and colour saturation, this is a subtle makeover, for which perhaps we should be grateful. There's a gentle boost to primary hues compared to the Full HD Blu-ray (such as the lurid yellow golf sweaters that Henry Hill hawks), but nothing as drastic as an obvious regrade. And peak HDR highlights aren't the order of the day here either. In fact the image feels dark generally, but has

some odd brightness fluctuations, such as in the Bamboo Lounge sequence in Chapter 9.

Audio: The disc's DTS-HD 5.1 soundmix is as fine as ever – front-heavy, but clean and atmospheric, with strong fidelity when the soundtrack starts pumping.

Extras: All extras are housed on the 1080p disc, and this is where this release becomes a little curious, as some that featured on the 25th Anniversary Blu-ray (such as the *Public Enemies...* doc) are not included – what's here are the two commentaries and featurettes of the 2007 Blu-ray. A comparison between 1080p platters reveals that the one bundled here is from 2007, meaning it's not the encode based on the 4K scan. Disappointing.

HCC VERDICT

GoodFellas

→ Warner Bros. → All-region UHD BD/All-region BD → £30

WE SAY: Classic Scorsese on a not-so-classic 4K release, which cuts corners with its second disc.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

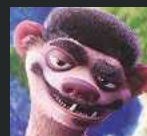
OVERALL: ★★★★★

'Touch my orange juice and I'll kill you'



Ice Age 5: Collision Course

Twentieth Century Fox → All-region UHD BD/Region B BD → £34



On the evidence of this fifth instalment, the *Ice Age* franchise has more than run its course.

The story's non-existent, and the 'amusing' banter that fills the void consistently feels flat, strained or both. The UHD BD transfer is pretty decent, though. Detail levels are clearly higher than those of the HD Blu-ray, and this detail joins forces with a more nuanced colour palette in giving the animation greater depth and a more artistic (if strangely less vibrant) feel than it does on standard Blu-ray. An Atmos mix features on the 4K disc.

★★★★★

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon

Sony Pictures → All-region UHD BD/All-region BD → £30



Ang Lee's Mandarin-language international wuxia hit sees Sony Pictures serve up a scintillating Ultra HD presentation, utilising a 4K master of original 35mm elements. Sharpness and detail, while not entirely consistent throughout, is remarkable, and the HDR and WCG grading is sympathetic to the source, pushing primary colours (but not aggressively so), catching the shiny edges of sword blades and working well at retaining detail in night-time fight/training scenes. Some all-new extras and a captivating Dolby Atmos remix make this an essential purchase.

★★★★★

I Am Legend

Warner Bros. → All-region UHD BD/All-region BD → £30



Along with *GoodFellas*, Warner has also dipped into its back catalogue and pulled out this Will Smith sci-fi/horror for a 4K outing. Image quality is good, with a slight uptick in detail present in the desolate New York exteriors, impactful colours and clarity maintained even in murky interiors. Some of the CGI beasts look a tad fake, though (but then they always did), and HDR highlights can seem a little heavy-handed. The UHD version only features the theatrical cut; the more satisfying alternate ending remains a staple of the 1080p disc.

★★★★★

Collecting...

Martin Scorsese

After revisiting *GoodFellas* in Ultra HD, **Team HCC** heads back over 40 years to pick out ten other movies from Martin Scorsese that prove he's one of Hollywood's living legends

HUGO 3D

Scorsese simultaneously looks towards the future of cinema and its origins in this magical, feelgood film about an orphan boy living in a train station in 1930s Paris, who hopes to unlock the mystery of an automaton that is his only connection to his dead father. In addition to being Scorsese's first foray into family-friendly filmmaking, *Hugo* remains his only venture into the world of 3D cinema. He succeeds so brilliantly in both areas that it makes you wish he'd give them each another try.

Get it: Entertainment in Video's 2012 UK hi-def release remains one of the flag-bearers for the stereoscopic Blu-ray format, making up for a modest array of extras with a dazzling 3D presentation of the film.

Ben Kingsley based his portrayal of Georges Méliès on Scorsese



MEAN STREETS

An early Scorsese effort featuring many of the themes (religion, gangsters, pool bar fights...) that crop up later in his oeuvre. Low-budget and lacking the sweeping scope of the director's best-known works, *Mean Streets* feels gritty, chaotic and authentic, which suits the narrative fine.

Get it: Oddly, UK Blu-ray buyers had to wait until 2015 for this crime drama to arrive in HD. Thankfully, Icon's Region B release is a good-looking one, and packs a director's chat track and vintage *Back on the Block* featurette.



THE AVIATOR

It took Scorsese's involvement to finally get a long-gestating biopic of legendary movie producer/inventor/airline owner Howard Hughes off the ground. Leonardo DiCaprio has never been better than he is here, while the setting gives Scorsese the chance to fully indulge his love of Hollywood's Golden Age.

Get it: The UK Blu-ray's 2.40:1 encode is jam-packed with detail and copes well with the various visual styles Scorsese adopts to represent different filmmaking eras. Extras are plentiful.



RAGING BULL

Legendary Scorsese/Robert De Niro teamup, with the actor famously piling on the pounds to play real-life pugilist Jake La Motta in the latter stages of his career – and learning how to box, too. Scorsese's decision to shoot in monochrome works wonders with the brutal fight sequences.

Get it: It may cost less than a tenner these days, but the 30th Anniversary Blu-ray is still a bit of a home cinema heavyweight thanks to its stark black-and-white encode and expansive selection of bonus material.



THE LAST WALTZ

Scorsese has a long history of documentary projects in addition to his fiction features, and this 1978 concert film – detailing *The Band's* supposed farewell gig – is a real gem. Classic rockin' and a rollin', with plenty of guest stars.

Get it: The imported 2007 US release offers LPCM 5.1 audio, but mega-fans might want to track down the recent (2016) limited Collector's Edition release, which adds a second BD with Scorsese interview, a 300-page book with photos and shooting script, and a faux red-leather case.



CASINO

A Mafia-filled companion piece of sorts to *GoodFellas*, with Scorsese again working from a screenplay from crime writer Nicholas Pileggi and bringing De Niro and Joe Pesci along for the ride. Like its Las Vegas setting, *Casino* is glitzy but bloated (running for nearly three hours). While at times it's perhaps the most shockingly violent movie the director has ever released, it's not without moments of wicked humour, particularly when it comes to blueberry muffins...

Get it: There are LaserDisc, DVD and HD DVD versions still floating about, plus a solid Blu-ray that offers a stack of bonus goodies.



THE DEPARTED

A remake of the brilliant Hong Kong undercover cop caper *Infernal Affairs*, transplanted to Boston and focusing on Irish mobsters, *The Departed* needed to be pretty good to justify its existence. Step forward a cast list including Jack Nicholson, Matt Damon, DiCaprio, Mark Wahlberg and Alec Baldwin, working under typically assured direction from Scorsese that earned him his first Academy Award.

Get it: Released on Blu-ray back in 2007 with a smattering of extras; over in the US it was also given a simultaneous HD DVD outing.



THE KING OF COMEDY

Dismissed by critics and ignored by audiences on its original release in 1983, Scorsese's film about an aspiring comic (De Niro) obsessed with getting on a late-night TV show has felt more and more prophetic with each passing year. Having undergone a critical reappraisal in recent years, this scathing satire of celebrity worship is now acknowledged as being on a par with fellow Scorsese/De Niro collaborations *Taxi Driver* and *Raging Bull*.

Get it: Fox's 2014 Blu-ray looks the business and includes a half-hour Q&A about the film.

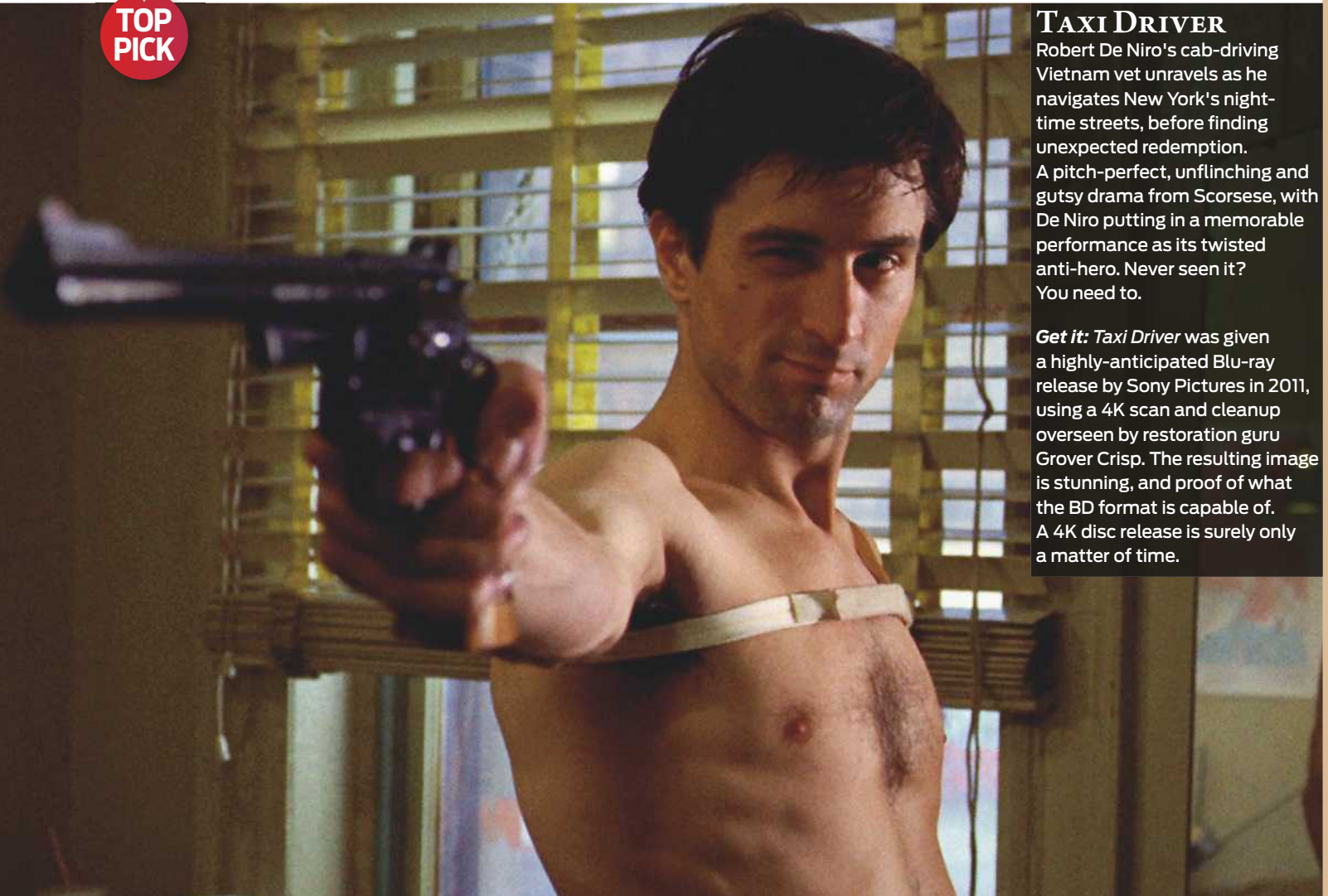


THE WOLF OF WALL STREET

Another flick where the director shows a keen eye for comedy, this time with a timely journey (the film was released in 2013) through the corrupt, extravagant side of Wall Street. Running for nearly three hours, this is lurid, profane and painfully funny – the result of Scorsese being given free rein to work from Jordan Belfort's autobiography.

Get it: Available on a now bargain-priced Blu-ray that trawls a fine image from Scorsese's mix of 35mm and digital footage, yet undersells you on extra features.

TOP PICK



TAXI DRIVER

Robert De Niro's cab-driving Vietnam vet unravels as he navigates New York's night-time streets, before finding unexpected redemption. A pitch-perfect, unflinching and gutsy drama from Scorsese, with De Niro putting in a memorable performance as its twisted anti-hero. Never seen it? You need to.

Get it: *Taxi Driver* was given a highly-anticipated Blu-ray release by Sony Pictures in 2011, using a 4K scan and cleanup overseen by restoration guru Grover Crisp. The resulting image is stunning, and proof of what the BD format is capable of. A 4K disc release is surely only a matter of time.

Integrated Systems Europe 2017

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Integrated Systems Europe

INTEGRATED SYSTEMS EUROPE (ISE)

2017 returns to RAI Amsterdam on 7-10 February 2017. The 14th edition of the world's largest AV and systems integration show promises to build on the momentum that the event has grown over the last decade to deliver an AV technology showcase like no other.

For the 2017 edition of the show, taking place at the award-winning RAI Amsterdam conference and exhibition centre, enhancements have been devised to ensure that ISE 2017 is the biggest and best so far. The most obvious example of this is the addition of a new hall (Hall 9) and the reorganisation of the show-floor layout to make sure that it maximises the attendee experience.

These changes mean an increase in exhibitors and exhibitor space, and an expected increase in visitors across the show's four days. ISE 2016 drew a record number of registered attendees (over 65,000) who flocked to see the products, services and solutions being presented by over 1,100 of the world's leading AV equipment manufacturers and service companies.

'ISE 2017 is set to be another ground-breaking year for the show. We're unveiling an updated show floor, which will allow the show to grow without

compromising the quality of the experience we offer both visitors and exhibitors,' explains Integrated Systems Events' Managing Director Mike Blackman. 'By giving even more across the four show days, we're sure that everyone involved will have an extremely productive ISE.'

ISE 2017 will attract professionals from every link in the systems integration value-chain, including manufacturers, distributors, dealers, contractors and consultants. The show is also a key event for end-users from a range of industries, including education, sports, corporate facilities, hospitality and live events. Professionals from over 150 countries will attend the show looking to network, pursue new business opportunities and see over 1,000 new product launches.

As has been the case in previous years, the show-floor will be categorised into themed areas. This segmentation provides a strong starting point for visitors interested in a particular type of technology, but it is by no means the end point. Relevant technologies can be found around the entire show. Visitors should check the ISE 2017 Floorplan on the show's website for a more detailed understanding.

ISE 2017 sees the addition of Education Technology to the established areas – these being:



ISE will be held at RAI Amsterdam, beginning February 7

Digital Signage and Digital out of Home, Unified Communications, Smart Building, Professional Audio, Residential Solutions and Smart Building.

Pre-show events

ISE is known for its vast and comprehensive exhibition, its educational elements and for the pre-show and at-show events on offer. These events kick off on Monday 6th February with two conferences – the Audio Forum and the Smart Building Conference – and conclude with the ISE 2017 Opening Address and Reception.

The Audio Forum, presented by one of ISE's media partners Concessioni, is a full-day event, which will include seminars hosted by qualified audio professionals.

As in previous years, the Smart Building Conference will also stage a full-day's programme, including expert speakers from across the smart building industry. It will be chaired by Bob Snyder, Editor in Chief of Channel Media Europe. Delegates can expect to discover key insights into emerging trends, energy savings, home automation solutions, as well as the best-practice approaches needed to meet Smart Home and Smart Building design and efficiency objectives.

The ISE 2017 Opening Address and Reception will round off the day in style, as people gather to hear from a guest speaker before having an opportunity for networking over drinks and food, while looking ahead to the upcoming show days. Full details of the Opening Discussion and Reception will be announced soon.

At-show events

The Sport Venue Integration Summit will be held on 9 February. Now in its third successive year, the summit will explore the latest technologies and workflows being utilised in the contemporary connected stadium. The free-to-attend, half-day conference programme has been devised by Sports Video Group Europe, a trade association for professionals working in television sports production, in conjunction with leading audio consultant, project manager and RH Consulting founder Roland Hemming.

The Future AV Professionals Programme at ISE 2017 will bring together students and employers. Taking place on the final day of the show – Friday 10th February – the specially curated event will comprise keynote presentations from relevant exhibitors, a tradeshow visit in the afternoon and a 'Job Fair'. During the Job Fair, students will be able to connect with companies and learn about career opportunities. More details about the agenda and timings will be announced soon.

Also on the final day of the show, ISE will host the M2D networking event, which will bring together manufacturers and distributors looking to forge new business relationships. M2D takes place in Café Amsterdam. Displays situated in Café Amsterdam, Entrance K and the Ruby Lounge near the Forum will display details of manufacturers looking for new and additional distributors of their products and services.

An undoubted highlight of the show will be the Friday Closing Keynote speech. ISE's organiser has confirmed that Daniel Lamarre, the President and CEO of Cirque du Soleil, will present the show's Closing Keynote speech on Friday 10 February 2017.

For over 30 years, Cirque du Soleil has been at the cutting edge of live entertainment creation and production with shows such as Varekai, Amaluna, TORUK – The First Flight, inspired by James Cameron's *Avatar*, The Beatles LOVE and Michael Jackson ONE combining stunning acrobatics, theatrics, visuals and music. Cirque du Soleil has consistently shown how creative expression can benefit from the adoption of the latest audio-visual technologies when used to enhance and complement a show's key storylines. Today, the company operates across five continents and is the world's largest theatrical production company.

New on the show floor

ISE 2017 will see new identities for the Show Floor Theatres and the addition of a fifth theatre. The CEDIA Smart Building Solutions Theatre lines up alongside the InfoComm Commercial Solutions Theatre (sponsored by Crestron), the CEDIA Residential Solutions Theatre, the ISE 2017 Audio Solutions Theatre, and the InfoComm Unified Communications Theatre (sponsored by Crestron).

The five Show Floor Theatres will provide unique opportunities for attendees to hear industry experts, consultants and manufacturers present the latest in workflow solutions, case studies, technology innovation and business analysis in an innovative and intimate setting situated in the halls of the RAI. All sessions in the Show Floor Theatres are free to attend.

The Digital Signage Summit will present DSS at ISE 2017 for the first time in the show's history. The half-day conference will follow a similar format to successful events held in Munich, Dubai and Moscow. Experts from across the digital signage and DoOH industry will gather to produce insight and expert opinion, while discussing cutting-edge projects and leading technologies.

Professional development

In addition to the Show Floor theatres, ISE's co-owners CEDIA and InfoComm International will present an even wider range of courses at ISE 2017. Both associations will offer more of their popular technical and business education, with offers in place for early bird discounts.

More news on pre-show events, professional development and new features taking place at the show will be announced in the coming days. For the latest show updates, check the Integrated Systems Europe website: www.iseurope.org ■



Record visitor numbers have lead to an additional hall and revamped layout

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HCC RATINGS KEY...	
Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

All prices quoted are approximate and may have changed

TOP 10 Televisions

**Sony KD-65ZD9** → £4,000

★★★★★

Sony finished 2016 on a high with this full-array LED Bravia (with advanced local dimming tech) that claims a 1,800-nit peak brightness. Cinematic, sublime pictures – and Dolby Vision support is a firmware update away. *HCC #267*

**Panasonic TX-65DX902** → £3,300 ★★★★★

This HDR-capable 65-incher wears its Ultra HD Premium badge with pride, and employs a full-array backlight to take control of its impressive luminance talents. Imagery is excellent. *HCC #259*

**LG OLED65E6** → £4,500 ★★★★★

Nominally a step-down from the Signature G6, but most will consider the tweaked bezel design and inferior sonics of this OLED worth settling for considering the price difference. *HCC #265*

**Samsung UE65KS9500** → £3,800 ★★★★★

Replacing the edge LED system of the KS9000 with a direct array yields illumination improvements. Colour-rich, super-bright visuals and smart design. Lacks 3D support. *HCC #265*

**LG OLED65G6** → £6,000 ★★★★★

An essential audition if your pockets are deep enough – this super-slim flat OLED TV combines the tech's PQ charms with a stunning design and nuanced sound performance. *HCC #264*

**Samsung UE55KS9000** → £2,100 ★★★★★

Samsung's quantum dot/edge LED 4K/HDR looker claims UHD Premium certification. Image quality is routinely great, but light banding can distract and 3D is absent. *HCC #260*

**Samsung UE55KS7000** → £1,300 ★★★★★

Straddling the world between genuine budget sets and more premium competitors, this 55-incher is perhaps Samsung's most appealing model. Impressive with both SDR and HDR. *HCC #265*

**Panasonic TX-50DX750** → £1,300 ★★★★★

Mid-range 4K/HDR LED TV. Not as impactful as its DX902 stablemate when it comes to pictures, but a neat design, fun UI and appealing screen size will win it plenty of fans. *HCC #260*

**Hisense 75M7900** → £2,500 ★★★★★

A massive 75in LED set at a bargain price. The appeal is its largescreen 4K playback: a lack of innate brightness and colour subtlety hampers HDR performance. *#267*

**Hitachi 49GHT69U** → £500 ★★★★★

49in 4K screen that could appeal to those on tight budgets. This £500 set offers a smattering of catchup, decent connectivity and a generally enjoyable image. No HDR support, though. *HCC #260*

TECH INFO: TELEVISIONS



4K is here to stay: The TV market is dominated by LED-lit LCD screens – plasma is long gone – but OLED is gaining a share as more brands adopt the self-emissive screen technology. 4K/Ultra HD models are now commonplace on screens above the 40in mark, which is where you should be looking for home cinema thrills. Curved models were once achingly trendy, but we're seeing a shift away from such design flourishes. Look out for sets offering support for HDR content, which is part of the UHD Blu-ray specification.



Active or Passive: At the beginning of the 3D era, most TVs featured the Active system that uses relatively expensive, powered 3D specs to deliver full-res images to each eye. Passive 3D TVs, which are now more common, have a filter over the screen and use non-powered specs with polarising filters. The glasses are cheap as chips, but the resolution of Full HD 3D is halved to 540 lines horizontally (but remains at 1,920 vertically). The same halving occurs with a 4K screen. 3D playback is increasingly being dropped by brands (including Samsung). Glasses-free 3D, heralded by Toshiba's early ZL2 TV, hasn't caught on. The tech is still being worked on, though.

TOP 5 Blu-ray movies

**Star Trek Beyond 3D**

A rousing Dolby Atmos mix and oh-so-deep stereoscopic 2.40:1 encode make this enjoyable sci-fi adventure a fine AV demo disc. Paramount loads the 1080p BD platter with plenty of informative extra features, too.

★★★★★

**Suicide Squad: Extended Cut**

DC's anti-hero flick, featuring Harley Quinn, Deadshot, The Joker and pals, is impressively quirky and fun – and the Blu-ray offers startling pictures and sound.

★★★★★

**The Jungle Book 3D**

Disney waves its live-action wand at Rudyard Kipling's famous tale of a boy and some beasts. Family fun that's stunning to look at (although the 3D presentation isn't as pleasing as its 2D partner).

★★★★★

**Zootropolis**

Disney's great run of CG 'toons continues in this layered, politically subversive animals-as-cops tale. The 2.40:1 image quality is simply gorgeous, while the DTS-HD MA 7.1 soundtrack bristles with activity.

★★★★★

**Captain America: Civil War**

The third standalone flick for Steve Rogers' baddie-battler is more of an Avengers ensemble (complete with Spider-Man!) that excels in every possible way. The BD has superb 2D/3D imagery and DTS-HD 7.1 sonics.

★★★★★

TOP 10 Blu-ray & Ultra HD Blu-ray players

- 1**  **Panasonic DMP-UB900 → £600** ★★★★★
 Boom! The Ultra HD Blu-ray format gets an inspiring debut in Panasonic's multi-talented deck that offers welcome user tweaks and a sterling picture performance. Smart skills include 4K-enabled VOD apps. *HCC #259*
- 2**  **Oppo BDP-103D → £600** ★★★★★
 This deck adds Darbee Visual Presence processing to the already excellent AV skills of its BDP-103EU predecessor. Superb construction, usability and features/connections. *HCC #228*
- 3**  **Pioneer BDP-LX88 → £1,100** ★★★★★
 The Japanese corp returns to the disc-playing high-end with a universal deck that weighs more than your AVR and drips with user tweaks and processing features. Stonking performer. *HCC #246*
- 4**  **Oppo BDP-105D → £1,100** ★★★★★
 This heavyweight deck builds upon the premium picture performance of the BDP-103D with a wealth of audiophile upgrades – if you're serious about music, check it out. *HCC #234*
- 5**  **Sony UHP-H1 → £400** ★★★★★
 Likely to be its last top-line BD deck before Sony embraces UHD, this player pleases with wide-ranging audio support (including DVD-A!), exquisite construction and slick performance. *HCC #261*
- 6**  **Arcam FMJ UDP411 → £1,200** ★★★★★
 Pristine visuals – including upscaled SD – and a classy sonic performance grant this Arcam instant appeal. The design and build is commensurate with the premium price tag. *HCC #244*
- 7**  **Sony BDP-S7200 → £180** ★★★★★
 A Sony deck without the curious angular design, the BDP-S7200 offers SACD support, hi-res audio streaming and 4K upscaling that's worth investigation. Not too pricey, either. *HCC #239*
- 8**  **Samsung UBD-K8500 → £430** ★★★★★★
 Ultra HD Blu-ray player that'll find fans courtesy of its sensible price point, connected smarts and eye-catching visuals. Build quality is a little uninspiring. *HCC #260*
- 9**  **LG BP556 → £85** ★★★★★★
 LG's top-of-the-line(!) disc-spinner is actually a budget offering. Design is a bit garish, but the addition of multiroom streaming, some smart apps and file playback sweeten the deal. *HCC #266*
- 10**  **Samsung BD-J7500 → £150** ★★★★★★
 This well-priced spinner offers twin HDMI outputs and multichannel phono audio for flexible system hookup, an appealing design, smart features and solid AV chops. *HCC #247*

TECH INFO: BLU-RAY PLAYERS

Matching your deck to your AV receiver: Blu-ray decks are designed to deliver top-notch images but Blu-ray is also about enjoying superior quality sound. When choosing a player, bear in mind the connectivity and decoding features of your AV receiver. If you're still using an older model that doesn't offer HDMI inputs, then you'll need a Blu-ray player with multichannel analogue audio outputs to enjoy decoded hi-res surround sound formats. Similarly, older but still HDMI-equipped receivers may not be able to cope with 3D/4K/HDR output signals, in which case you'll need a deck with dual HDMI outputs – one channelling audio to your receiver amp, the other piping video direct to your TV.

What about consoles?: Both Sony's PlayStation and Microsoft's Xbox platforms support Blu-ray playback – the latter's Xbox One S will even spin your Ultra HD Blu-ray platters. Using a console can be an affordable alternative to a deck, particularly when gaming and media playing talents are taken into account, but the joy pad user experience can feel a little odd and you'll need to make sure no one else is playing *Grand Theft Auto* first.



DEMO DELIGHT

Lucy: The popcorn-munching Luc Besson sci-fi/actioner starring Scarlett Johansson scrubs up great on Universal's Ultra HD Blu-ray release, making the most of the format's dynamic range and wider colour capabilities. Demo heaven.

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TOP 10 Projectors

**Sony VPL-VW520ES** → £8,800

★★★★★

The top dog in Sony's domestic SXRD projector range, this couples native 4K optics with HDR compatibility for a state-of-the-art performance. Capable of jaw-dropping imagery and offers plenty of install flexibility. *HCC #254*

**JVC DLA-X7000** → £5,700 ★★★★★

With contrast and brightness improvements over the more affordable DLA-X5000, this is a great bigscreen option, although its SDR performance impresses more than HDR. *HCC #259*

**Sony VPL-HW45ES** → £1,850 ★★★★★

The most affordable model in Sony's home cinema range, the Full HD-resolution 45ES features excellent light management for a routinely cinematic image. Great value. *HCC #263*

**ViewSonic Pro7827HD** → £600 ★★★★★

Pictures impress from this single-chip DLP budget option that carries a third HDMI input designed for smart sticks. Includes ISF calibration. 3D spex are an optional extra. *HCC #261*

**JVC DLA-X5000** → £4,000 ★★★★★

Fourth-gen eShift projector marries its pixel-shifting talents with a contrasty performance, HDR support and HDMI 2.0a. Not the smoothest with motion, and price tag is considerable. *HCC #257*

**Epson EH-TW9300** → £3,000 ★★★★★

Epson brings HDR playback and 4K up-rezzing to an agreeable price tag. Colourful and well-contrasted visuals, but don't expect an HDR knockout. *HCC #266*

**Optoma GT5000** → £1,000 ★★★★★

Ultra short-throw model with healthy brightness that makes sense for regular living rooms where a traditional install isn't possible. Casts Full HD images from just 30cm. *HCC #261*

**BenQ W2000** → £800 ★★★★★

Average black-level performance limits this model's all-round appeal, but elsewhere this Full HD DLP budget PJ catches the eye with its calibration options and detailed visuals. *HCC #257*

**Optoma HD27** → £800 ★★★★★

Another budget beamer where black levels aren't exemplary, but there's plenty to like here including the small form factor and vibrant colours. Limited zoom of 1.1x. *HCC #264*

**Philips Screeneo 2.0** → £1,500 ★★★★★

Philips retools its ultra short-throw PJ to now offer a Full HD resolution. Enjoyable imagery and easy setup, but some may miss the media player/LED lamp of its predecessor. *HCC #262*

TECH INFO: PROJECTORS



Installation: Although projectors can be temporarily placed on a cupboard, stand or shelf situated at the rear of the room (use the adjustable feet on its base to level the image so that it aligns with the screen), a much better long-term solution is to mount it on your ceiling with an appropriate bracket. Projectors can be quite heavy, though, so it's important to ensure that the bracket is attached firmly – ideally, it should be secured to a joist. Position your PJ so that an imaginary line from its lens to the opposite side of the room hits the screen exactly half-way along its width. The location of your screen should therefore dictate where your projector is. A decent tape-measure or laser pointer will help you to determine the position.

Throw distance: Throw distance specifies the distance between the projector and screen for a focused image of given size. As the vast majority of projectors are equipped with a zoom lens, minimum and maximum throw distances are often specified – say, 3.01m to 6.08m for a 100in. 16:9 image. Shorter throw distances are ideal for smaller rooms, and longer ones for larger rooms. Simple.

Throw ratio: Sometimes, a manufacturer will quote a throw ratio rather than a throw distance. This is basically the throw distance divided by the image width. To get the projected image size, divide the distance between projector and screen by the specified figure. Once again, the inclusion of a zoom lens means that upper and lower figures are usually specified.

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TOP 10 Speakers


- 


1 Monitor Audio Gold 300AV → £7,150 ★★★★★
MA revamps its Gold Series and we pay serious attention. This big-ticket package excels across the frequency range, offers exquisite design and packs setup flexibility via the dipole/monopole FX surrounds. *HCC #251*
- 


2 Q Acoustics 3000 5.1 Cinema Pack → £700 ★★★★★
A superior compact package with driver improvements over the previous 2000i series. The two-way cabinets and dual-driver sub combine to offer impressive audio for the money. *HCC #247*
- 


3 XTZ Cinema Series 5.1.4 → £3,700 ★★★★★
Spectacular dynamics, gut-thumping bass and a sense of scale that most systems at this price only dream of – XTZ's 3D audio-ready setup is an easy recommendation. *HCC #259*
- 


4 KEF R Series 7.1 → £6,500 ★★★★★
A 7.1 array mixing dipolar and direct surrounds, this authoritative package takes its cues from KEF's Blade concept speaker and offers faultless, largescale home cinema sonics. *HCC #217*
- 

5 Monitor Audio Bronze B5 AV → £1,500 ★★★★★
Like their Gold siblings, these feature switchable surround speakers and MA's C-CAM drivers. Smaller in stature and output, but eminently more affordable. *HCC #254*
- 

6 Wharfedale DX-1SE → £400 ★★★★★
Delightfully compact 5.1 package (although with two-way satellite speakers) that blends a tidy design with crisp surround sonics at a very tempting price. *HCC #267*
- 

7 ELAC Debut 5.1.2 → £1,950 ★★★★★
Well-priced floorstanding Atmos system that manages to balance subtlety and precision with an exciting delivery. Subwoofer includes app-based room EQ. *HCC #262*
- 

8 DALI Opticon 5.1 → £3,200 ★★★★★
The Opticons employ driver designs created for DALI's higher-end models, and showcase a talent for both involving music presentation and high-octane home cinema. *HCC #260*
- 

9 Dynaudio Emit 5.1 → £3,200 ★★★★★
Entry-level for Danish brand Dynaudio – still a hefty chunk for a 5.1 array. What the money gets you is a wonderfully natural and cohesive soundstage and stonking build quality. *HCC #263*
- 

10 Q Acoustics Concept 5.1 Cinema Pack → £1,750 ★★★★★
Step-up Q Acoustics offering with handsome floorstanders joined by standmount surrounds employing the Concept Gelcore construction. Classy, consistently neutral performance. *HCC #257*

TECH INFO: SPEAKERS



Centre speaker: Handles most of the dialogue and onscreen effects. Should be positioned above or below the screen as close to it as possible. Of course, if you're using a projector screen, it should ideally be placed behind it.

Front speakers: Left and right speakers should be positioned either side of the screen, in line with the centre. Turn the speakers in slightly to face the listener if there isn't an even movement of sound across the front of the room.

Subwoofer: Can be positioned wherever it sounds best or can be tucked out of sight due to the non-directional nature of low-frequency signals. Be aware that close positioning in corners or next to walls can create a boomy effect.

Surrounds: Position alongside the listener, pointing in or slightly behind the ears for a good surround effect. The back wall is not a good position for surrounds – it is, in fact, where you should locate the sixth and seventh speakers (rears) in a traditional 7.1 array.

DEMO DELIGHT

Deadpool: A bonus treat for buyers of this flick on Ultra HD Blu-ray (as it's not included on the 1080p platter) is Fox's first Dolby Atmos track. The soundmix keeps pace with *Deadpool*'s visceral, kinetic approach, proffering hyperactive effects placement, appreciable soundstage depth and a rich, boisterous LFE channel.

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Photo courtesy of Gary J. Fernandez

TOP 10 AV Receivers/AV Processors

**Anthem MRX 1120** → £4,000

★★★★★

Combining Anthem's superb ARC room EQ system with 11-channel amplification makes this an essential consideration for full-spec Atmos setups. Muscular, precise sound. No networking skills, though. *HCC #265*

**Arcam AVR850** → £4,500 ★★★★★

High-end seven-channel AVR marrying Class G amplification and Atmos (and future DTS:X) support with talented Dirac Live Room EQ. 11-channel pre-outs for full-fat setups. *HCC #257*

**Denon AVR-X4300H** → £1,300 ★★★★★

Nine-channel receiver with HEOS multiroom integration and 11-channel processing (Atmos, DTS:X, plus Auro-3D as a paid-for upgrade). Great, detailed sound and foolproof usability. *HCC #267*

**Trinnov Audio Altitude32** → £27,000 ★★★★★

Capable of outputting 32 discrete channels and mapping Dolby Atmos, DTS:X and Auro-3D sources to any setup via advanced EQ. Only premium cinema owners need apply, though. *HCC #262*

**Denon AVR-X2300W** → £500 ★★★★★

This almost entry-level Denon offers excellent value for money, with a well-balanced sound signature and bulging feature set. Seven-channel design won't suit all setups. *HCC #263*

**Yamaha RX-A3060** → £2,000 ★★★★★

New nine-channel flagship from Yamaha features excellent room EQ implementation, well-judged DSP modes, and an even-handed, effortless sound. *HCC #264*

**Marantz NR1607** → £600 ★★★★★

The latest slim-line AVR from Marantz continues the brand's good work when it comes to space-saving sonics. Seven-channel amp with object-based audio. Punchy, lively sound. *HCC #266*

**Pioneer VSX-1131** → £550 ★★★★★

Seven-channel model with Atmos and DTS:X support that features an overhauled remote control and UI to improve usability. Bass-rich, energetic sound. *HCC #265*

**Cambridge Audio CXR120** → £1,500 ★★★★★

This Brit-designed 7.2-channel receiver focuses on performance and ignores object-based audio and built-in Bluetooth. Sound quality is assured and construction is monstrous. *HCC #251*

**Onkyo TX-RZ800** → £1,050 ★★★★★

Feature-packed (DTS:X, HDCP 2.2) and sporting a new, clean design, Onkyo's mid-priced nine-channel AVR is easy to use and sounds sprightly, if a little short on aggression. *HCC #253*

TECH INFO: AV RECEIVERS



Tackling new heights: A recent innovation in AVR circles is the introduction of Dolby Atmos, the object-based sound format that has taken off in commercial cinemas and is supported in the home by the likes of Onkyo, Pioneer, Denon, Marantz and Yamaha. This requires new height speakers in addition to a regular 'flat' 5.1 or 7.1 speaker configuration. The heights can either be physically mounted in/on your ceiling, or provided via up-firing reflective models. Setup can be complex, but the results are certainly impressive. Atmos-encoded Blu-rays are a bit thin on the ground, but you can use Dolby Surround post-processing with regular 5.1/7.1 soundtracks to get the most from your new AVR/speakers. Rivals to Atmos are Auro-3D, which uses height speakers in a different configuration, and DTS:X. Most AVR brands have pledged support for the latter; software is beginning to arrive.

How much power?: Many of the mass-market AV receiver manufacturers are involved in a specifications race to see who can say their model is the most powerful, which can be confusing for consumers. For instance, both Krell's £7,000 S-1500 seven-channel power amp and Yamaha's £500 RX-V675 both claim 7 x 150W – the important part is that Krell's figure is into an eight-ohm load with all channels driven, and that Yamaha's is with one channel into a four-ohm load, which is hardly a real-world situation. The best advice is ignore the numbers game and get a demo of your desired AVR with the same, or similar, speakers that you intend to partner it with.

TOP 5 Bonus features

**The Trouble with Titian Revisited**

Arrow Video's Blu-ray of '60s Roger Corman horror *Blood Bath* includes four different cuts of the movie plus an 81-minute doc helping you make sense of its bizarre production history.

★★★★★

**Star Wars: The Force Awakens commentary**

Director JJ Abrams provides a trivia-packed chat track on the Collector's Edition Blu-ray release of Disney's box office killer. Indispensable for *Star Wars* geeks.

★★★★★

**Napoleon: Triptych**

On a package that also features a remarkable five-hour commentary track, the option to watch the movie's three-panel footage on three displays (via three discs) is the icing on the cake.

★★★★★

**The Giant's Dream**

Superior hour-long documentary on *The Iron Giant's* Signature Edition Blu-ray that is refreshingly honest about the toon's production and its now-famous box office failure. Brilliant stuff.

★★★★★

**Deus Ex Machina: The Philosophy of Donnie Darko**

A new 85-minute documentary gives fans of this bewitching cult sci-fi plenty of info about the film's production, themes and Easter Eggs.

★★★★★

TOP 10 Subwoofers

- 


SVS SB-2000 → £600 ★★★★★
This follow up to the SB-1000, which incorporates a new 12in driver and revamped Sledge DSP amplifier, offers immense value for money. A mid-sized woofer that imbibes your Blu-rays with potent LFE, the SB-2000 sounds quick and taut, and is a perfect introduction to what a truly good sub can accomplish. *HCC #233*
- 

REL 212SE → £2,750 ★★★★★
Lush design joins engineering nous in this premium sub with two active 12in drivers supported by a pair of passive radiators. Loud, deep and impactful, your BDs are in safe hands. *HCC #246*
- 

JL Audio Fathom f212v2 → £6,500 ★★★★★
A second-gen outing for JL's 2 x 12in monster, with an increase in power (now 3,600W) and improvements to the room EQ system among the changes. Sounds as good as you'd imagine. *HCC #261*
- 

REL S/3 SHO → £1,450 ★★★★★
The 10in, 400W S/3 is part of REL's revamped 'Super High Output' Serie S line. Performance is excellent, with speed, control and a scale bigger than you might expect. *HCC #264*
- 

Bowers & Wilkins PVID → £1,200 ★★★★★
One of the coolest-looking subs on the planet, B&W's PVID uses DSP trickery to craft an opulent low-end performance. The touch-sensitive OLED display is pure class. *HCC #212*
- 

BK Electronics P12-300SB-DF → £475 ★★★★★
Bass heads can get outrageous value for money in the shape of BK's overperforming 12in sub. A front-firing model is also offered, and other finishes knock the ticket down to sub-£400. *HCC #247*
- 

ELAC SUB 2070 → £1,300 ★★★★★
A dual-driver, 600W sealed sub with control and onboard EQ system driven by a free Android/iOS app. Meaty, assured performance, with useful tweaks offered. *HCC #261*
- 

Eclipse TD520SW → £3,000 ★★★★★
This twin 8in woofer, driven by ICEpower amplification, aims for ultimate speed and tone – and succeeds. Simply put, the TD520SW is worth every penny of its asking price. *HCC #249*
- 

SVS PC-2000 → £800 ★★★★★
The cylinder construction means this 12in, 500W design can boast a large cabinet but a relatively small footprint. Good value with weighty, slamming bass, but a little lacking in nuance. *HCC #267*
- 

Artison Nano 1 → £800 ★★★★★
Artison's media room-friendly woofer tucks twin 6.5in bass drivers and a 300W amp into its compact frame. Bass extension isn't the deepest, but this is tight, fast and heaps of fun. *HCC #253*

TECH INFO: SPEAKERS



Why use more than one sub?: Using two subwoofers (or perhaps four) should, in theory, bring huge rewards in terms of bass performance. But remember that LFE is a tricky beast to control. Running two subs may simply double problems in your room like room boom and suck-outs, where outgoing and reflected bass sounds cancel each other out. If you have some flexibility in where you place subwoofers, trial and error may well throw up some interesting results. The acoustics wizard Floyd E Toole (his book *Sound Reproduction: The Acoustics and Psychoacoustics of Loudspeakers and Rooms* is fine bedtime reading) suggests one LFE sub to either side of the room may be best for accuracy while placing them in the front corners would be best for overall bass power. Yet there is no hard and fast rule as to what will work best for every room, and you may find that simply using one (large) subwoofer is preferable as it's the easiest to get sounding right.

DEMO DELIGHT

Star Wars: The Force Awakens: Bass is a constant (phantom?) menace in Disney's *Star Wars* sequel, whether it's underpinning the complaining, rumbling engine of the Millennium Falcon, adding weight to frequent explosions or used to bring scale and depth to locations. It seeps into every element of the Blu-ray's DTS-HD MA 7.1 soundmix, meaning your subwoofer is called upon to put in a serious shift.

TOP 5 Console games



Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare

The sci-fi trappings may upset *COD* purists, but this is one of the series' best entries in years. The action-packed single-player campaign is a blast; multiplayer extends the fun.

★★★★★



LEGO Star Wars: The Force Awakens

Brilliant arcade puzzler (with some light action) that makes great use of *Force Awakens*' set-pieces and chucks in other levels set further afield in the *Star Wars* universe.

★★★★★



Gears of War 4

A thrilling continuation of the Xbox action stalwart, with an absorbing, well-scripted single-player campaign and wonderfully colourful and vibrant visuals (with HDR on Xbox One S). Give it a spin!

★★★★★



No Man's Sky

Massive, intergalactic exploration that feels like a cross between *Minecraft* and *Elite Dangerous*. Relaxed, absorbing gameplay with a gorgeous 50s/60s sci-fi aesthetic and beautiful orchestral score. Odd but fun.

★★★★★



Uncharted 4: A Thief's End

The final entry in this blockbuster franchise is simply epic, both in terms of gameplay (driving, puzzle-solving, stealth battles...) and the exquisite 1080p visuals. Roll on next year's movie adaptation!

★★★★★

TOP 10 Accessories

- 1 KEF R50 → £600 ★★★★★**
 KEF's Dolby Atmos-enabled reflective modules are a smart choice for anyone looking to beef up their speaker system. Using the company's Uni-Q point source drivers pays real dividends, enabling full-range sonics that reach deep into your cinema room. Styling and build quality are first rate. £600 gets you a pair – you'll soon want four... *HCC #252*
- 2 Amazon Fire TV 4K → £80 ★★★★★**
 Amazon reboots its media player to include 4K video prowess, greater storage capability and a souped-up engine. The result is an intuitive add-on that's ideal for 4K TV owners. *HCC #254*
- 3 Nvidia Shield Android TV → £150 ★★★★★**
 The Android TV platform gets the hardware it deserves – this stylish set-top box offers potent processing, resulting in a slick gaming and media playback experience. 4K capable. *HCC #262*
- 4 QNAP HS-251 → £300 ★★★★★**
 Adding HDMI connectivity to a NAS device is surprisingly useful – and this slim-line model from QNAP is styled to grace your living room. Flawless media playback and responsive. *HCC #248*
- 5 Logitech Harmony Elite → £270 ★★★★★**
 Flexible and relatively easy to set up, this all-in-one remote package combines touchscreen handset and hub with smart device app. Worthwhile if you have a stacked kit rack. *HCC #256*
- 6 Amazon Echo → From £150 ★★★★★**
 While the sonic performance of this Bluetooth speaker isn't revelatory, the real fun comes from the Alexa voice assistant AI, which means you'll be barking commands in no time. *HCC #267*
- 7 Xbox One S → From £250 ★★★★★**
 The retooled Xbox One adds Ultra HD Blu-ray playback, 4K streaming and HDR gaming to the feature list. Available in 500GB/1TB/2TB versions. *HCC #264*
- 8 PSB Imagine XA → £350 ★★★★★**
 These two-way Dolby Atmos-enabled upfiring speakers are fairly chunky, but work well at creating a height layer and the £350-per-pair ticket makes them an enticing option. *HCC #264*
- 9 DVDO iScan Mini → £275 ★★★★★**
 HDMI 4K upscaler (using Silicon Image's VRS processing) that teases sharpness from HD and SD sources. A good fit for an entry-level or mid-range 4K TV. *HCC #264*
- 10 Sony PlayStation 4 Pro → £350 ★★★★★**
 A mid-cycle upgrade of Sony's console brings 4K and HDR gaming, plus app streaming, but not UHD BD playback. Gorgeous gameplay is the USP here. *HCC #268*

TECH INFO: MEDIA PLAYERS



What about my TV?: Most flatscreen TVs from the major brands (Sony, Samsung, Panasonic, LG, Philips, Hisense, etc) also incorporate media player functionality, using Ethernet or Wi-Fi to stream from your home network, or from plugged-in USB drives. Most modern Blu-ray players offer this, too. However, file support is rarely as extensive as on dedicated devices from the likes of Western Digital and A.C. Ryan, and our experience shows some are more adept at playback from USB than over a network. Nor (obviously) is a TV or BD player portable. If your media collection extends beyond JPEGs and MP3s into lossless audio rips and esoteric HD video formats, then a standalone player is a good investment.

Storage: You can, if you really want, store all your files on a plethora of USB drives, or on your PC, but it's best to get a NAS (Network Attached Storage) device for simplified sharing of your media across a network with



multiple players, such as one from Netgear's ReadyNAS range (pictured). These dedicated devices often offer RAID array file backup, and are managed via browser software. Storage capacity can be anything from 1TB to 12TB and beyond.

TOP 5 Blu-ray/DVD boxsets

**Game of Thrones: The Complete Sixth Season**

Another brilliant BD boxset for HBO's jewel in the crown. Atmos ensures AV thrills, and the story remains strong despite no longer being based on George R. R. Martin's source novels.

★★★★★

**Gomorrah: Complete Seasons 1 & 2**

Thrilling Italian crime drama based on the same book as the 2008 film. This seven-disc set changes the audio from LPCM 2.0 for S1 to DTS-HD 5.1 mixes for the second run.

★★★★★

**Daredevil: The Complete First Season**

Marvel's 13-part series originally streamed on Netflix, and is now available on a boxset that impresses with imagery and DTS-HD 5.1 mixes, but is bereft of extra features.

★★★★★

**Dissent and Disruption: Alan Clarke at the BBC (1969-1989)**

Mega boxset with a mega price tag (£150) featuring a comprehensive collection of Clarke's work spread across 11 BDs and two DVDs.

★★★★★

**The Walking Dead: The Complete Sixth Season**

More zombie-killing antics from US network AMC, again shot on 16mm film and blessed with stomach-churning surround mixes. Plenty of extras to sink your teeth into, too.

★★★★★

TOP 10 Soundbars & Soundbases



Yamaha YSP-5600SW

→£1,900 ★★★★★

With its 46 drivers (including upfiring) this premium 'bar delivers precisely-steered and immersive audio, even of the Atmos variety. Potent wireless sub and 4K-capable HDMI switching sweeten the high-end deal. *HCC #254*



Canton DM55 →£330 ★★★★★

Canton's smallest soundbase still delivers big sonic thrills. Twin woofers underpin clean and crisp mids and highs, and build quality is first-rate. Doodle to use. Bluetooth built-in. *HCC #260*



Samsung HW-K950 →£1,300 ★★★★★

Soundbar with additional wireless rears and Dolby Atmos support via four upfiring drivers. Impressively largescale performance, good connectivity. No native DTS support. *HCC #263*



Sony HT-XT3 →£450 ★★★★★

A great-sounding soundbase blessed with HDMI connectivity, HDCP 2.2, Wi-Fi, Bluetooth, multiroom support, screen mirroring and app control. There's little to complain about. *HCC #250*



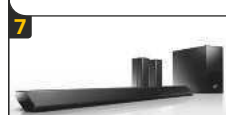
Geneva Model Cinema →£550 ★★★★★

The Swiss brand comes up trumps with this five-driver Bluetooth-capable soundbase. It musters a massive sound with huge dynamics, rich bass and articulate highs. *HCC #261*



Q Acoustics Media 4 →£330 ★★★★★

A no-nonsense offering from the speaker specialist, which ignores HDMI inputs and daft DSP modes in favour of creating a nuanced, solid 2.1 soundscape. *HCC #238*



Sony HT-RT5 →£500 ★★★★★

Sony joins the growing 'soundbar with wireless surrounds' market with an enjoyable debut that packs some worthwhile DSP modes and plenty of media-savvy functionality. *HCC #257*



DALI Kubik One →£800 ★★★★★

The Danish speaker brand brings a slice of glamour to your setup with this stylish soundbar. No HDMI or digital decoding but it packs a tight, lively and nuanced sound. *HCC #248*



Acoustic Energy Aego Sound3ar →£200 ★★★★★

Smallscale second-room option impresses with its punch and clarity, but a few EQ tweaks would have been nice. No HDMI connectivity. *HCC #264*



Orbitsound A70 →£500 ★★★★★

Not overly specified – there's no HDMI, for instance – but this elegant 'bar/sub combi just about justifies its price tag with an enveloping and very well-balanced performance. *HCC #251*

TECH INFO: TV PLATFORMS



TV addicts – go free, or pay-to-view?:

The analogue switch-off has created a competitive market in free-to-air platforms, while Sky and Virgin Media are squaring up to the likes of EE TV, Amazon Prime and Netflix. Deciding which service is right for you can be complex, and you may find your needs are best catered for by a combination.

Sky+HD: The long-running satcaster offers a plethora of HD channels, with content including recent movie releases, live sports and sought-after US shows. Hardware options include the 2TB dual-tuner PVR. Premium Sky Q service offers wireless multiroom and 4K content among its tricks.

Virgin Media TiVo: The cable giant offers a three-tuner PVR (1TB) with intelligent TiVo recording tricks, catch-up apps (including Netflix and Spotify), and over 240 channels (depending on package). Premium Sky content can be added on a monthly basis.

Freeview: Common option when it comes to TVs and STBs. Freeview offers 13 HD channels plus SD and radio. Freeview Play adds IPTV integration to the EPG – and you'll find it on Panasonic and Finlux TVs.

Freesat: Satellite service offering a similar – but not identical – channel lineup to Freeview, delivered via a dish but without a subs cost. Budget-priced STBs are available.

YouView: This relatively new kid on the block integrates the UK's main catchup portals directly into a backwards EPG. Again, channels are broadly similar to Freeview and there's no contract. Humax (PVRs) and Sony (TVs) are leading the hardware charge.

TOP 5 Back-catalogue Blu-rays



Paths of Glory

Stanley Kubrick's succinct anti-war drama gets the Masters of Cinema Blu-ray treatment, with exclusive extras and a beautiful, restored monochrome 1080p image that unearths heaps of detail.

★★★★★



To Live and Die in L.A.

William Friedkin's sun-soaked 1980s crime flick gets a deserved high-quality BD release, with a director-approved 4K restoration and abundance of new extra features making this an essential pickup.

★★★★★



10 Rillington Place

Nicely timed to coincide with the recent BBC series, this debut Blu-ray release from new UK indie label Indicator adds a 32-page booklet to a striking 1080p encode of the grimy 1971 true-life serial killer movie.

★★★★★



It Came From Outer Space

Universal unleashes this 1953 science-fiction classic on a fine-looking (and well-priced) 3D Blu-ray release. Audio thrills come via a DTS-HD 3.0 presentation of the original three-track soundmix.

★★★★★



The Iron Giant: Signature Edition

Another one to cross off the 'Why no Blu-ray release?' list – Brad Bird's excellent animation finally makes its hi-def debut on a faultless platter from Warner available at a bargain price.

★★★★★

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TOP 5 PVRs



Virgin Media TiVo, £subscription

This triple-tuner PVR offers recording flexibility, useful features – you can undelete deleted shows! – and smart TiVo functionality. If you're in a cable area, consider it.

★★★★★



Sky Q, £subscription

Sky's new top-tier product offering dazzles with its image-rich user interface, wireless multiroom skills and recording flexibility delivered by the PVR's 12 tuners. Now supports 4K content.

★★★★★



Humax HDR-1100S, £190

Freesat Freetime PVR that impresses with its usability, VOD options and form factor – Humax's small, white box will slot into any kit rack. We tested the 500GB version – 1TB and 2TB models are also available

★★★★★



Humax DTR-T4000, £subscription

This YouView-based PVR is required to get BT Sport's new Ultra HD channel – available to those with BT fast fibre and a BT TV sub. Easy to use and with 1TB of storage

★★★★★



EE TV Smart Box £subscription

This quad-tuner 1TB PVR, from the mobile/broadband corp, offers innovative Replay 24-hour channel recording and great Smart device streaming. Needs more catch-up though

★★★★★

TOP 5 Headphones



Sony MDR-HW700DS, £800

Comfy cans supplied with an HDMI surround processor, enabling multichannel audio to be fed to a virtual 9.1-channel soundstage. The effect is superb – great for late-night listening

★★★★★



Sony MDR-1ABT, £300

Another cracking Sony pair with a good sonic balance, here with integrated Bluetooth allowing for cable-free movie watching (although they can be used wired too). Large design perhaps not suited to travel

★★★★★



Lindy Cromo NCX-100, £100

A cost-effective domestic option and great for travelling, these noise-cancelling 'phones (which can also be used as a normal passive design) feature a pleasant, balanced sound

★★★★★



PSB M4U1, £220

Aimed at both home and on-the-move use (and supplied with a carry case and two cable options), the M4U1s offer solid bass response and impactful highs. Build quality is good, as is comfort

★★★★★



Bose QC35, £290

The latest in the QuietComfort range ditches the wired connection in favour of Bluetooth but retains Bose's luxurious styling and rich performance. Noise-cancelling mode is very efficient.

★★★★★

TOP 5 Wireless speakers



KEF Muo, £300

Portable Bluetooth speaker that's a cut above much of the competition. KEF's sonic knowhow results in a punchy, dynamic presentation that cherishes lossless rips. Excellent build quality

★★★★★



Sony SRS-X11, £60

An affordable palm-sized Bluetooth speaker with internal rechargeable battery, Sony's SRS-X11 is supremely portable and sounds decent for the money. A neat little gizmo. Get two and they can work in stereo

★★★★★



Q Acoustics BT3, £280

Bluetooth stereo pair with optical input makes a good alternative to a soundbar (there's even a subwoofer pre-out) while remaining a dab hand at music. Neat and tidy design, good price.

★★★★★



Simple Audio Listen, £400

Desktop stereo speakers with Bluetooth support, these benefit from separate tweeter/midbass units and a classy construction. Performance is well-balanced, and a subwoofer output is offered for extra bass

★★★★★



Star Wars Bluetooth speakers, £150 each

Bring a touch of fun to your tunes with these Stormtrooper and C-3PO replica Bluetooth speakers from ACWorldwide. Solid sound quality and gorgeous styling

★★★★★

HOME CINEMA

Choice

→ IN THE NEXT ISSUE

HDMI 2.1 What you need to know about the new digital display standard
Samsung QLED Talking next-gen LED tech with the Korean screen giant
4K movie den Step inside a stunning pro install

→ REVIEWS

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CONTENTS SUBJECT TO CHANGE – BUT ONLY FOR THE BETTER

ISSUE
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AV Avenger

What trends will reshape home entertainment in 2017? And why does **Steve May** think Blu-ray will stage a comeback?

THERE ARE SEISMIC changes looming on the home entertainment radar. Some 2017 trends are easy to predict – even my butler knows the next six months will see 4K TVs that support Hybrid Log-Gamma HDR hit the market, while Aunt Harriet is eagerly awaiting huge developments in UHD gaming. Other trends are less obvious. Will Blu-ray, refreshed and 4K resolute, actually buck predictions and retake ground lost to streaming services?

I've been polishing my crystal balls (for the sake of a cheap joke, I always carry two) and have some predictions it seems timely to share.

For starters I expect to see a lot more AI and voice interaction. Amazon's Echo is leading the charge here, and one area where voice control looks likely to have the biggest impact is hi-fi. Asking your sound system to play music is transformative, as voice control offers a spontaneity that apps and traditional controllers simply can't match. Even two-channel purists may start embracing the future.

And we're entering a new era of speech recognition. The news that Microsoft has created a system able to transcribe human speech with greater accuracy than a professional stenographer will have those of us who conduct interviews for a living weeping with joy. But its implications are more far reaching, particularly when it comes to dynamic metadata and intelligent search. Sky has made no secret of the fact that it intends to add voice search to Sky Q. Soon, chatting with your kit stack could be as commonplace as losing the remote control.

While Amazon and Microsoft rival Google has its eye on AI, it also wants to oust Netflix from its position as streaming king. Its YouTube service is prepping a rival subscription platform called Unplugged. Likely to debut Stateside first, Unplugged has already signed a content deal with CBS and is

actively seeking to woo 21st Century Fox and Disney. 4K and HDR? Yep, it'll do all that.

You could be forgiven for thinking that more streaming services are a good idea, as it brings choice. But you'd be wrong. When media giants need content, they dig deep to acquire it. We've already seen this happen with sport in the UK, which is now inconveniently sliced and diced between Sky and BT. When the shows you watch are similarly spread across multiple services, you either have to subscribe to more platforms, using multiple devices, or simply go without. I'm not unusual in taking both Netflix and Amazon Video, but **even as a card-carrying early adopting putz I don't think I'd want to spring for yet more services.**

Not that Netflix is going to sit idly by and watch YouTube stream in on the action. The corp has committed to doubling its original programming slate from 30 to 60 shows over the next twelve months, and has a war chest of \$6 billion to fund them. Slowly but surely, Netflix is reducing its reliance on licensed content. In just a few years half of everything on Netflix could be original material. That means a lot of programmes are about to be displaced elsewhere in the TV ecosystem.

The unlikely beneficiary of any increase in TV fragmentation could actually be Blu-ray. When streaming services cannibalise the OTT telly market, and movies are ousted from low-cost streaming services back to premium pay TV, we might find we're back buying the films we love on silver disc. With a new generation of lower-cost 4K UHD players incoming, the humble Blu-ray could be in for a timely resurgence. And that's one trend I can definitely get my head around ■

Do you subscribe to multiple TV and streaming services? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

Steve May's
New Year
resolution is to read
his AVR's manual
from cover to cover.
But first he needs
to remember where
he put it.





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